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THE PLATFORM

ITS RISE AND PROGRESS

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BY

HENRY JEPHSON

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I

SECOND EDITION

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PREFACE TO SECOND EDITION

It is becoming in these times more and more the practice for authors to criticise their critics. I need not follow the fashion, for I have to thank mine. They have recognised the difficulty of the task I undertook, the great labour it entailed, and, with one or two exceptions, they have criticised my work in a most friendly spirit.

Many of them have, however, complained that the work is too long, too laden with quotations. If it is so, the faults were wilfully committed.

I held that it was better by far to give my readers an opportunity of forming their own ideas as to the class and style of speeches in vogue at certain times of our history, and in certain agitations, than merely to give a description of them, in which much of their distinctive spirit must have been lost—in other words, I thought it better to give the facts and speeches themselves rather than merely the view of them which shaped itself in my mind.

And as regards the length of the work, I did not undertake the task of investigating a subject so vast and intricate as the growth of the power of the Platform,

merely to give a comparatively valueless summary in a small book, rapidly read and as rapidly cast aside. I wished rather to write such a history of the subject, as would be fairly complete and reliable, and as would save subsequent historians some of the labour of re-examining the limitless material from which my facts and quotations were taken.

But while offering an explanation of what I admit is quite open to criticism, and at the same time thanking my critics for their comments on my work, I must express a little disappointment at the failure of most of them to grapple with some of the main conclusions which I stated.

The comparative power of the Platform and the Press has been very fully discussed. The comparative power of Parliament and the Platform has, however, been by no means so fully examined—no champion having come forward to vindicate the superiority of Parliament.

Nor has that thorny subject, the increased control of representatives by their constituents, exercised by means of the Platform, been discussed, nor my statements thereon contested.

Nor, so far as I am aware, have any of my critics attempted to contest the main thesis of the work, that the Platform is an attempt on the part of the people of this kingdom to work out and solve, at least for themselves, the great problem of popular government.

Is it then too much to assume that the propositions which thus pass without contest are, as a matter of fact, true and indisputable ?

PREFACE TO FIRST EDITION

In presenting this work to the public, there is but one plea which I would urge in extenuation of some of the comments which may be made on it—namely, that it is the first history of the Platform which has ever been written; and just as there are special difficulties to be surmounted in constructing a new road in an unexplored country, so there are special difficulties in writing a history of a subject hitherto not treated historically.

In putting forward this plea I do not, however, in any way wish to deprecate criticism or discussion on the conclusions set forth. Rather do I invite them; for, even limiting the matter to our own country, it is manifestly desirable that the position of so great a political institution as the Platform should be thoroughly discussed and defined.

But the subject has a further interest. "The Platform" is an attempt to graft a system of democratic government on the ancient constitution of this kingdom — or, in other words, is an attempt at a solution of the great problem of popular government which has in recent times come into such commanding prominence.

As a great experiment in that world-lasting problem,

the system which the British people have adopted [redacted] are attempting to work out, must, whether it fails whether it succeeds, attract the closest and most searching attention of rulers and peoples in other countries and at later times than ours. It is, therefore, I venture to think, the more essential that the position, and power and functions of the Platform, as an institution of government in this kingdom, should be clearly and distinctly defined.

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INTRODUCTION

It is difficult to give a completely satisfactory definition of "the Platform." As a comprehensive definition, I should say, that every political speech at a public meeting, excluding those from the Pulpit and those in Courts of Justice, comes within the meaning of "the Platform."

It may be objected that this definition includes speeches made after a public dinner or banquet, but such occasions have been so largely used for great political speeches outside Parliament, that to exclude them from any history of "the Platform" would be to treat this great subject most imperfectly.

It may also be said that this definition includes political lectures—that a Platform speech and a political lecture are two totally different things; but the difference is more one of the manner and circumstances of delivery than of matter; and public discussion usually follows a lecture.

I think, then, that this is, on the whole, a fair and sufficiently distinct definition, as it fills the space between the speeches in Parliament on the one hand, and the written opinions and arguments of the Press on

the other hand, and this is what the Platform practically does.

I must also make an explanation. From the very commencement of this work, I have called "the Platform" by the name we now know it by, though the name only came into use in its present sense long after the thing itself was in existence.

What technically is now called the "platform" was during the last century, and in the early part of this, known by the name of the "Hustings," which word survives in use to the present day. Occasionally it was designated by the terms "scaffold," as at a meeting of the inhabitants of Westminister in 1795, or by the word "stage." Later on, the words "tribune" and "rostrum" and "forum" were sometimes used. In 1820 we find the word "platform" used as describing the place from which the speakers addressed the meeting, and gradually, as we advanced into the present century, the word "platform," by a perfectly simple and natural transition, came into general use and acceptation, not merely in the technical sense, as the place from which the speech was made, but as descriptive of the spoken expression of public opinion outside Parliament.

For the sake of clearness therefore, and so as to present the history of this great institution as a consecutive whole, unbroken by change of designation, I have adhered to the word "Platform" throughout.

One other remark I also wish to make. I have confined this work to the *political* "Platform," for it is in its political aspect that the real power of the Platform lies.

PART I

THE RISE OF THE PLATFORM

TO

ITS FIRST SUPPRESSION

1760–1802

CHAPTER I

THE BIRTH OF THE PLATFORM

AMONG the political institutions of this kingdom, there is in this, the last decade of the nineteenth century, none of greater importance than "the Platform."

A century and a half ago—and, in the history of a nation, that is not a very long period—three, and only three, great political institutions were in existence in this country, dividing between them the government of the kingdom—Crown, Lords, and Commons, venerable from their antiquity, their birth lost almost in the uncertain records of the past.

In process of time there arose a fourth—the Press—for long not attaining to the position of being a component part of the constitution, but exercising, as time went on, ever-increasing influence, and, indirectly, ever-growing authority.

And still later, almost in fact within the memory of living men, there has arisen one more—the Platform.

Not so very long since, the word, in its present sense, was unknown; a little farther back, the thing itself did not exist. Now, the Platform is the feature of our political constitution which distinguishes us alike from all the forms of government that the wit of man

has contrived in the past, or that the civilised states of Europe have attained to in the present. It has taken its place among the most vital, active, and powerful of the governing forces of the constitution. Its powers for good and for evil are portentous, and its sway over government is practically unlimited. An investigation therefore as to the origin, growth, and present position of so great a force in the State presents the most enthralling subject for the consideration not alone of all persons having at heart the welfare of this great country, but also of those who take an interest in the wider subject—the science of government.

No exact year can be assigned as the precise date of birth of the Platform. Like the seedling of a mighty tree, it gradually developed into life. Instances are to be found here and there, even very far back in our history, of meetings held by the people, and of speeches being delivered; but they are isolated instances, and their repetition was sternly discouraged by those whose hands wielded the sword of authority. For many centuries, indeed, circumstances were scarcely favourable to popular interference in the affairs of government, or even to the expression of such popular feeling as existed; nor were the authorities of the State tolerant of anything that seemed even remotely to encroach on their prerogatives.

Down to the end of the seventeenth century the idea of any real political influence being obtained or exercised by means of the Platform, does not appear to have been thought of by any one. The Revolution of 1688 was effected without its instrumentality, or the slightest recourse to its aid, and during the reigns of William and Mary, and of Anne, public political meetings, or public speeches, were practically unheard of.

In the earlier half of the eighteenth century, however, an event occurred, which, though not actually originating the political Platform, had a most powerful influence in its direction. This was the great religious revival led by Wesley and Whitefield. This great movement, with its impressive meetings, and its thrilling addresses, awoke in the people what can only be described as a new sense. It was then, for the first time in our history, that great orators came into direct contact with large masses of the people, and stirred some of the intensest and most passionate feelings of human nature to their very depths. Then, too, for the first time, that the people felt the deep charm, the fascination of the spoken word, and learned the mighty power of earnest speech. Then, too, for the first time, that great masses came together, and, in coming together, had revealed to them the community of interest which bound them to their fellow-countrymen. Perhaps, too, as wave after wave of emotion swept over the assembled thousands, some may have discerned, dimly and indistinctly, the enormous latent power of the people. These were experiences never to be forgotten—confined then to the sphere of religious teaching and enthusiasm, but affording a suggestion if not an example, and a precedent for similar action in the sphere of politics. The close analogy of many of the proceedings in this great movement to those which have since been familiarised to us in great political agitations, proves, very conclusively, that it was one of the most powerful influences towards the creation and development of the political platform. We have, first of all, examples not alone of the people assembling together, but of huge open-air meetings. Whitefield began preaching at open-air meetings in 1739. One afternoon in the February of that year

"he stood upon a mount in a place called Rose Green," near Bristol, "his first field pulpit, and preached to as many as came to hear, attracted by the novelty of such an address."[1] His second audience, at Kingswood, consisted of some 2000 persons, his third of 5000, until, at last, as many as 20,000 persons, it was said, were gathered together to hear him. After preaching for some time near Bristol he proceeded to London, and preached at Moorfields. Persons told him he would never come away from the place alive, but "they knew not the power of impassioned eloquence upon a topic in which every hearer was vitally concerned." Then he preached at Kennington Common to enormous gatherings of some 30-40,000 persons. Here, indeed, was a new and most startling event in the life of the nation, the masses assembling together, in a way utterly inconceivable before, and portentous now in this, that it taught them the first great rudimentary lesson in popular government—that they could assemble. Here, too, was a totally new means of instructing, and enlightening, and influencing the people—capable of extension in many directions, and disclosing vast possibilities. And these great lessons were not confined to Bristol and London, for Whitefield and Wesley, and soon after, their disciples and followers, preached through the length and breadth of the land to great gatherings of the people. Wesley describes how, at Gwenap, he "stood on a wall in the calm still evening, with the setting sun behind him, and almost an innumerable multitude before, behind, and on either hand;" how, at Exeter, he preached in the moat of the old castle.

"It was an awful sight! So vast a congregation in that solemn amphitheatre, and all silent and still."

[1] See *Life of Wesley*, by Robert Southey, vol. i. p. 230.

Whitefield preached on one occasion from a stage which had been erected at a fair for some wrestlers; on another, he attracted round his pulpit on a race-course thousands of spectators.

Nor was the example afforded by this great movement of religious revivalism limited to meetings and speeches. In organisation also it afforded a precedent, for societies or associations were formed by the disciples and followers of Wesley and Whitefield to give the movement coherence and system.

Southey, in his *Life of Wesley*, partly recognised this important consequence of the movement. He said, "Perhaps the manner in which Methodism has familiarised the lower classes to the work of combining in associations, making rules for their own governance, raising funds and communicating from one part of the kingdom to another, may be reckoned among the incidental evils which have resulted from it; but in this respect it has only facilitated a process to which other causes had given birth."[1]

Thus, when, some years later, the great political movement embodied in the Platform began, a considerable portion of the people were already familiarised with the Platform by their religious experiences and training, and were ready to adopt as the organ and instrument of their political aspirations and desires the agent which they had found so well adapted to the needs and circumstances of their religious life.

Some little time, however, was still to elapse before the political awakening took place which was to call the political Platform into actual life; but about the middle of the eighteenth century certain movements can be

[1] *Life of Wesley*, by Southey, vol. ii. p. 533.

discerned among the people, portending future political activity.

The political temper of the nation was gradually and without intermission becoming more democratic, and the nation more capable, as well as more accustomed, to judge of its general interests, and those to whom they were entrusted. Hallam, referring to this period, says,[1] "Upon the whole matter it must be evident to every person who is at all conversant with the publications of George II.'s reign, with the poems, the novels, the essays, and almost all the literature of the time, that what are called the popular or liberal doctrines of government were decidedly prevalent. The supporters themselves of the Walpole and Pelham administrations, though professedly Whigs, and tenacious of Revolution principles, made complaints, both in Parliament and in pamphlets, of the democratical spirit, the insubordination to authority, the tendency to republican sentiments, which they alleged to have gained ground among the people."

"It is certain that the tone of popular opinion gave some countenance to these assertions, though much exaggerated to create alarm in the aristocratical classes, and furnish arguments against redress of abuses."

Hallam is not alone in these opinions. A contemporary and most interesting description of the country, and of some of the silent changes which were going on in it, was given in a letter in *The Public Advertiser* of 1760,[2] signed "Henry Fielding," which completely endorses the view Hallam has expressed, and throws even more light on the subject than Hallam did.

"One known division of the people in this nation,"

[1] *The Constitutional History of England*, vol. iii. p. 398.

[2] See *The Public Advertiser*, 11th September 1760.

wrote Fielding, "is into the nobility, the gentry, and the commonalty. What alterations have happened among the two former of these I shall not at present inquire; but that the last, in their customs, manners, and habits are greatly changed from what they were, I think to make appear.

"If we look into the earliest ages, we shall find the condition of this third part to have been very low and mean. . . . The commonalty, by degrees, shook off their vassalage, and became more and more independent of their superiors. . . . Nothing hath wrought such an alteration in this order of people as the introduction of trade. This hath, indeed, given a new face to the whole nation, hath in a great measure subverted the former state of affairs, and hath almost totally changed the manners, customs, and habits of the people, more especially of the lower sort. The narrowness of their fortune is changed into wealth; the simplicity of their manners into craft; their frugality into luxury; their humility into pride; and their subjection into equality.

". . . Now to conceive that so great a change as this in the people should produce no change in the constitution is to discover, I think, as great ignorance as would appear in the physician who should assert that the whole state of the blood may be entirely altered from poor to rich, from cool to inflamed, without producing any alteration in the constitution of the man."

And he sums up by concluding "that the constitution of this country is altered from its ancient state, and that the power of the commonalty has received an immense addition, and that the civil power, having not increased, but decreased, in the same proportion, is not able to govern them."

All these circumstances then, the spirit begotten by the religious revival, the growing tendency towards popular or liberal doctrines of government, and the increasing power of the commonalty, were combining, in the middle of the last century, to create a public opinion which hitherto had not existed, or, at any rate, had not made itself felt in the government of the country, and which before long would begin to give evidence of its existence by and through the Platform.

And here may be stated a fact which elucidates and explains the rapid growth of the Platform once it came into being, namely, that the Platform is not an extraneous growth upon the constitution, but that the seeds or germs of it lay in the constitution itself.

In the first place, the system of county government which existed in the middle of the last century led to meetings of the principal people in the county whenever any public emergency or crisis arose. In each county there was a Lord-Lieutenant, who was the principal representative of government authority, and who was charged with the preservation of the peace of the county. Under him was the magistracy; and then under them the freeholders, who, as electors of the members of the House of Commons, or lower House of Parliament, had a sort of recognised position; and when any emergency arose, it was not unusual for the Lord-Lieutenant to convene the magistrates, and sometimes the freeholders, to consider the necessary measures to be taken.

Thus, in 1745, a meeting of the nobility, gentry, and clergy of the county of York was convened by the Archbishop of York and three gentlemen, "in the absence of the Lord-Lieutenant," "to consult of such measures as may be thought necessary for the support

of the King and Government, and for the immediate defence of this county in particular, at a time when the very being of our constitution, and the security of our liberty and property and religion, is in the most apparent and imminent danger."[1]

The meeting was duly held on the 24th September, and the Archbishop made a speech, and recommended the formation of an association.

Again, just shortly before the death of George II., one finds in the newspapers of the period[2] a report of a public meeting having been held at the Guildhall in London, and another of the nobility, gentry, clergy, and freeholders and others of the county of Middlesex and city of Westminster at St. Alban's Tavern, London, to consider of the most effectual methods to be taken for the support of his Majesty and his Government against the invasion now threatened, and for the security of this county and city.

This latter meeting was convened by the Lord-Lieutenant of the county, and it was attended by the Duke of Newcastle, Henry Legge, Charles Townshend, and "several other persons of distinction," who passed a resolution: "That a subscription be forthwith opened for an immediate voluntary contribution," to be distributed in bounties or rewards among men who would enlist for home service. Such instances at this period are rare, but they show that a machinery existed even then, and was sometimes had recourse to, for the collection and expression of the public opinion of a county—a machinery, moreover, which was capable of being freely used should the need arise.

That the people were prone, even without such

[1] See Wyvill's *Political Papers*, vol. i. p. i.

[2] See *The Public Advertiser* of August and September 1759.

official machinery, or on so large a scale, to have recourse to meetings, and discussions, and petitionings for the redress of grievances, may be inferred from an advertisement in a Birmingham newspaper of 1754:[1] "The inhabitants of Birmingham are desired to meet upon Friday, 27th December, at three o'clock in the afternoon, at the Widow Packwood's, in the Cherry Orchard, to consider whether it may not be proper to apply to Parliament for a redress of grievances complained of by the restraint put upon the wheel carriages." History does not report whether the meeting was held or not, and consequently we are left in the dark as to the character of popular oratory on such an occasion, but the advertisement itself throws some light on the tendencies of the time.

Independent altogether of gatherings of county personages which in a way foreshadowed the Platform, there were certain definite "rights" which the people possessed, which contained in a clearer and more definite manner the germs, indeed, almost the framework, of the Platform. One of these was the important fundamental "right" of "petitioning" the King, or either House of Parliament, for a redress of grievances, public and general, or even private and individual. That means of approaching the Crown or the Legislature for the redress of private grievances had existed centuries back—for the redress of public grievances it dates back at any rate as far as the reign of Charles I., if not farther. Thus, in 1642, "The humble Petition of the Gentry, Ministers, and Freeholders of the County of York, assembled at the Assizes there holden," was presented to his Majesty on the 5th of April;[2] and

[1] See *A Century of Birmingham Life*, 1741-1841, by J. A. Langford, p. 72.

[2] A copy is in the British Museum, and of the King's reply.

also in the same year another petition was presented from "the Knights, Justices of the Peace, Gentlemen, Ministers, Freeholders, and others of the County of Cornwall." To later generations this important right —after the flagrant attempt at its violation by the Sovereign in 1688—was secured by the Bill of Rights. This Magna Charta of the Revolution declared that it was "the right" of the subject to petition the King or either House of Parliament; and in order to secure the full freedom of complaint, even against the great authorities of the State, it was further enacted that all commitments to prison, or even prosecutions for such petitioning, were illegal.

Petitions in the earlier times were usually only from an individual, or, where from a small number of persons, they were got up by two or three individuals, and carried round for signature. But sometimes they were from a considerable number of persons, and when this was the case, it necessitated the people coming together in a meeting, where some order had to be maintained, some regular form of procedure to be followed, and some inter-communication of ideas to take place. Thus the first rude outlines of the Platform were actually in existence a good long time ago, were almost coeval, in fact, with the origin of public petitioning. This right was undoubtedly one of the most valuable which the people possessed, for it afforded them the means of giving public expression to their wishes, and obtaining the consideration of their prayers in times when freedom of speech was watched with hostile eyes. Moreover, it brought them together for a common object; it gave them the opportunity of presenting to the governing powers of King and Parliament views which otherwise could not have reached those great authorities.

ties, and, fenced round as it was with immunity from punishment, it afforded a safe and almost unassailable basis of action in the long struggle for the goal of popular government.

The right, however, it must be remarked, was in one way not absolutely unlimited, for it was subject to legislative restriction by an Act of Parliament, which had been passed in the reign of Charles II.,[1] with the object of preventing tumults or disorders, which had become common, "upon pretence of preparing or presenting public petitions or other addresses to His Majesty or the Parliament." This measure enacted, that no person or persons whatsoever should in future "solicit, labour, or procure the getting of hands, or other consent, of any persons above the number of twenty or more, to any petition, complaint, remonstrance, declaration, or other address to the King, or both or either House of Parliament, for alteration of matters established by law in Church or State, unless the matter thereof have been first consented unto, and ordered by three or more Justices of that County, or by the major part of the Grand Jury of the County, or, if arising in London, by the Lord Mayor, Aldermen, and Commons in Common Council assembled;" and that no petition should be delivered to the King or either of the Houses of Parliament "by a company of more than ten persons."

But, as a matter of fact, by the middle of the eighteenth century, this Act appears to have been completely disregarded, and to have fallen into desuetude. Yet, however, the practice of petitioning was only [illegible] limited, and no real effort had yet been [illegible] to use it as a means of political agitation.

[1] See 13 Charles II., cap. 5, 1661.

Dr. Johnson, in his pamphlet entitled *The False Alarm*,[1] gives a humorous if slightly biassed description of the method of getting up a petition; but he shows, nevertheless, the occasion which petitioning sometimes afforded for the use of the Platform. He says: "The progress of a petition is well known. An ejected placeman goes down to his county or his borough, tells his friends of his inability to serve them, and his constituents of the corruption of the government. His friends readily understand that he who can get nothing, will have nothing to give. They agree to proclaim a meeting; meat and drink are plentifully provided; a crowd is easily brought together, and those who think that they know the reason of their meeting undertake to tell those who know it not. Ale and clamour unite their powers; the crowd, condensed and heated, begins to ferment with the leaven of sedition. All see a thousand evils, though they cannot show them, and grow impatient for a remedy, though they know not what. A speech is then made by the Cicero of the day; he says much, and suppresses more, and credit is equally given to what he tells and what he conceals. The petition is read and universally approved. Those who are sober enough to write, add their names, and the rest would sign it if they could. The petition is then handed from town to town, and from house to house, and wherever it comes the inhabitants flock together that they may see that which must be sent to the King. Names are easily collected. One man signs because he hates the papists; another because he has vowed destruction to the turnpikes; one because it will vex the parson; another because he owes his landlord nothing;

[1] This pamphlet was published in 1770, a few years after the time I am writing of.

"because he is rich; another because he is poor; one to show that he is not afraid; and another to show that he can write."

Another somewhat analogous practice to petitioning which was recognised in the Constitution was also conducive to the use of the Platform, though by no means to the same extent—that of presenting addresses to the Sovereign. These were more restricted in the nature of their contents than petitions, and were generally more complimentary and adulatory in their character.

Recourse had frequently been had to them in previous reigns, generally on the occasion of the accession to the throne of a new sovereign, and though an address did not necessitate a meeting and speechifying such as we now associate with the name of the Platform, still in many cases a meeting of a sort was held, and we may safely therefore assume that speeches of a sort were delivered.

In fact, the description "We, the High Sheriff, noblemen, gentlemen, clergy, and freeholders," had become already a stereotyped form of address when [illegible] of the Georges came to the throne in 1760. On his accession, a very large number of addresses were presented to him condoling with him on the death of his royal grandfather, and conveying to him assurances of loyal devotion.[1]

"The High Sheriff, Gentlemen, Clergy, and Freeholders of the County of Derby," sent him an address. "The Lord-Lieutenant and Custos Rotulorum, Nobility, High Sheriff, Gentlemen, Clergy, and Freeholders of the County of Stafford," addressed him, and other counties, boroughs, and corporations too numerous to mention;

[1] See *London Gazette*, January 1761.

and though it is not always stated that the addresses were from persons "in public meeting assembled," yet from the terms in which some of the addresses were signed, it is clear that they emanated from meetings. And a couple of years later, namely in 1762, the practice was again had recourse to in a different matter, and on, for the time, a large scale; and from the account of the occurrence given in a work called *The History of the Minority*, it is clear that Addresses to the Throne, sometimes at least, proceeded from meetings, and that the signatures were not merely collected by a house-to-house visitation.

"The victory (*i.e.* the Parliamentary approbation of the peace with France in 1762) being as complete as the 'favourite' (Lord Bute) could wish, he had now nothing to do but to try the force of corruption among the people, in order to obtain another mode of approbation. The Lieutenants of the Counties had begging letters sent to them entreating them to use their utmost influence towards procuring addresses. The mayors and other magistrates of corporations, the leading men in societies, and every person who had influence enough to collect ten or twelve men together, were all applied to for addresses on (*i.e.* in approbation of) the peace. . . . No means, honourable or base, abject or forcible, were left untried to obtain these prostitute addresses. . . . Some of them came from counties which never met to consider them, with subscriptions (signatures) mendicated from house to house, of such as could be prevailed upon to sign them. Others were surreptitiously procured from packed assemblies, to which those only were secretly invited whose subserviency to a job was secured, and opposed by others accidentally present.

"They were, in general, devised and dictated by some favourite tool of administration." [1]

There were thus two most valued and important public practices, which contained the germs or seed of the Platform — the practice of Petitioning, and the custom of Addresses.

More important, however, than the tendency to the Platform encouraged by the exercise of the right of "Petitioning" and the practice of "Addressing" was the fact that, on the somewhat rare occasions of the election of representatives to serve in Parliament, the Platform did actually exist in one of its phases at this time, and might have been seen in actual operation. Here it was recognised by Government as so necessary a right, that in all the chances and changes of history, and all the attempts made to suppress free speech, no attempt was ever made to interfere with public meetings or free speech at the time of an election. In a more or less nebulous sort of way it had thus existed for a considerable period, though not giving evidence of its future development, nor awakening even a suspicion of the part it was to take in the political life of the kingdom.[2]

It was known here under the name of the "Hustings." By the middle of the eighteenth century the practice was not uncommon for the candidates to appear on the hustings, and to address the electors. In the metropolis the Platform was much used at election time. Here, in the three constituencies — the city of London, the

[1] See *The History of the Minority* during the years 1762, 1763, 1764, and 1765. London 1765, p. 88.

[2] Up to the time of Henry VI., when the law respecting 40s. freeholders was passed, there is no trace whatever of any instance of polling; an election was by show of hands. So late as the reign of James I. the right to a poll when demanded was not completely established. See *The Institutions of the English Government*, by Homersham Cox.

city of Westminster, and the borough of Southwark, and sometimes, too, in the county of Middlesex—not alone did an election seldom pass without a contest; but as the constituencies were large, and the electors numerous, being several thousands in number, there was a very large amount of platforming or speech-making on each occasion. The metropolis then led other places almost altogether in the matter of politics, and the use of the Platform was thus suggested to the country; but from the nature of the other constituencies at the time, the example was not one which could be very widely followed.

Elections were by no means so frequent in the middle of the last century as they have been in the present century, Parliament then generally continuing to the full term of its prescribed existence of seven years; and it was only in the case of contested elections that more than a nominal or formal recourse was had to the Platform. In those few cases where a contest occurred, the Platform was confined to the county town, where the election took place, and then to but a very limited auditory, for travelling was difficult in those days, the distances in large counties very great, and the assemblage of large numbers of the people practically an impossibility. Moreover, votes being given for more tangible reasons than political convictions, the proceedings on the hustings were rendered considerably less attractive than they otherwise would have been.

Nor were such speeches as were made reported at any length in the newspapers. One speech appears to have escaped the general neglect of such Platform oratory as there was at the general election of 1761, and one or two extracts from it are worth quoting, as it

is one of the earliest election Platform speeches which was printed and published at any length. It was delivered by Alderman Beckford (later the celebrated Lord Mayor) upon his being re-elected as member for the city of London. He said: "I take this opportunity of declaring in the face of all the Livery of London that my principles ever have been, and ever shall be, to support the religious and civil liberties of this country. You see, gentlemen, I speak my mind freely; a decent freedom is the first privilege of a member of Parliament, and, therefore, I hope I may give no offence whatsoever. I am sure I never intended it; yet I am very sensible that, while I have sat in Parliament, I have given offence; but I declare publicly, herein, I never did say anything against men, but against measures; the opposition I sometimes made has been to measures and not to men. . . . You, gentlemen, are the first city of the kingdom. You are in point of riches and in point of influence superior, and all the nation will take example from your city; therefore, I hope the same independence which you have shown upon every occasion you will still continue, and that you will set an example to all other cities and boroughs of this kingdom of that independence, and that uncorrupt conduct you have been always famous for.

"Gentlemen, our constitution is deficient in only one point, and that is, that little pitiful boroughs send members to Parliament equal to great cities; and it is contrary to the maxim that power should follow property. Therefore, it becomes you of the Livery of London to be extremely upon your guard, as you have been on the present occasion, to choose members that are entirely independent; and I do most heartily congratulate you upon your present choice of the

other three members. As to myself I have nothing to say."

It is, it must be acknowledged, a good specimen of election oratory, and is additionally interesting as showing how early in our history the question of Parliamentary reform was thought of by public men and spoken of from the Platform.

From what purports to be a correct list published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* of 1761[1] of the contests at the general election of that year, the first in George III.'s reign, there were contests in only two counties[2] in England, and in only sixteen boroughs, while there was no contest either in Wales or in Scotland; and how trumpery these contests in some cases were may be imagined from the fact that in five of the sixteen boroughs contested, the number of votes polled by the successful candidate was under 100. This election was, however, a specially quiet one.

Lord Stanhope, in his *History of England*,[3] thus described it: "The elections which took place during March and April were not marked by any outburst of popular feeling. So hushed had been the old invectives of party during Pitt's administration—so faint were as yet the new—that scarce any war-cry remained to the contending factions, and that the contests turned on persons rather than on principles. For that very reason, however, no previous general election had been marked by greater venality. The sale of boroughs to any wide extent may be dated from this period."[4]

But besides the actual contested elections there was a preliminary proceeding in connection with a general

[1] See *The Gentleman's Magazine*, May 1761.

[2] Durham and Hertfordshire.

[3] Lord Stanhope's *History of England*, vol. iv. p. 329.

[4] See also Hallam, vol. iii. p. 402.

election which fostered and encouraged public meetings of a sort, and consequently the Platform in some small degree, namely, the meetings held for the selection of candidates. In the newspapers of 1761 there are numerous election addresses from candidates basing their claims on the fact of their having been selected at a general meeting of the freeholders.[1]

"As I had the honour to be nominated and approved at a very numerous meeting of the freeholders," is a common commencement to their addresses. In fact, this appears in counties and any large constituencies to have been the almost invariable practice, though, of course, in the majority of cases, it was little more than a form.

But of the Platform itself in these times, and on these occasions, little is to be gathered from contemporary writings, for the speeches, so far as the elections in the country were concerned, were not deemed worth reporting by the newspapers of the time; in fact, the reports of the proceedings generally, except those relating to the metropolis, were extremely meagre, scarcely giving more than the names of the men who were returned as members, and only in some cases giving the number of votes.

From all which we may conclude that though the Platform was to a certain extent actually in operation at election time, and though an election in some cases necessitated a moderate use of it, it had little or no influence, little or no power. That it was there, however, is the main fact for us, for there lay the seed from which the mightiest power was later to be developed.

Summarising, then, the position of the Platform at the middle of the last century, or rather at the begin-

[1] See *The Public Advertiser*, 1761; also *Lloyd's Evening Post*, 1761.

ning of the long and eventful reign of George III., some ten years later, it would appear first, that the great religious revival had stirred those feelings, and awakened those ideas, which in reality lie at the bottom of our democratic form of government; and next, that increasing numbers of the people of the nation were awaking to a sense of their own rights and interests—were becoming more desirous of participating in their own government. These were the great contributing causes to the Platform, the circumstances which created the need for it.

In the "hustings" the people had an example—an imperfect and occasional one, but still an actual present example—of how they might attain to participation in political authority. In the exercise of the right of "petition" to the King and Parliament, they were able to realise the possession of the means of at least presenting their views to the Executive and the Legislature; and the idea of association for political objects had been in some small measure already suggested to them.

Nor is it, I think, too much to say that the whole of the natural tendencies and popular inclinations were towards "the Platform," that the sentiments of the people were strongly determined in favour of freedom of speech, and of its use; that all the ways and manners of life and business in England had in them decided tendencies towards associations, meetings, and speeches; and finally, that the self-governing genius of the people was most essentially and eminently one which required some greater outlet than was afforded by the narrow and restricted system of Parliamentary representation then existing.

To complete our examination of the position and

prospects of the Platform at this period, the reverse of this picture must be given. It can be portrayed in bolder and more decided colours, for arrayed in opposition to all that the Platform implied stood the King, the House of Lords, and even the House of Commons.

When George III. ascended the throne in 1760, England, under the guidance of William Pitt the elder, had reached a height of fame and power never before attained, and the glory was the more striking by contrast with the humiliating position of the country when he was called to the Ministry.

"Under him," said Edmund Burke, writing in the *Annual Register* of 1761,[1] "Great Britain carried on the most important war in which she ever was engaged, alone and unassisted, with greater splendour, and with more success than she had ever enjoyed at the head of the most powerful alliances. Alone, this island seemed to balance the rest of Europe."

At home the country was prosperous and the people contented, proud of their successes abroad, and hailing with enthusiasm the accession to the throne of a young King, more English than any of his immediate predecessors. In one of the numerous addresses presented to the King on his accession to the throne, there is a description of the state of the popular feeling, which, high-flown though it reads, was not exaggerated.[2]

"It gives us great pleasure," wrote the Staffordshire gentry and freeholders, "and must afford your Majesty the highest satisfaction, to find no other contest among your subjects than what arises from a noble emulation to excel each other in loyalty and affection to your Majesty's person and government;" and Alderman

[1] *Annual Register*, 1761, p. 47.

[2] See *The London Gazette*, 6th to 10th January 1761.

Beckford, in the speech which I have already referred to, thus described the happy condition of affairs:[1] "You have upon all occasions, gentlemen, whenever any attack was made upon the constitution of this kingdom, readily stepped forth and stood in the breach; and you have supported the liberties of the nation with firmness and resolution. We are now come to times, gentlemen, when there is no occasion for that firmness or that resolution, for we have now (praise be to God for it) a truly patriot King. You have likewise a patriot Minister, and therefore it will be your own fault if you are not the happiest people in all Europe."

It was not, however, their fault that they did not long remain so. The earliest acts of the young King added to his popularity. In his first speech to Parliament[2] he said: "Born and educated in this country, I glory in the name of Briton, and the peculiar happiness of my life will ever consist in promoting the welfare of a people whose loyalty and warm affection to me I consider as the greatest and most permanent security of my throne."

And a few months after, as a sort of earnest of favours to come, he declared that he looked upon the independency and uprightness of the judges of the land as essential to the impartial administration of justice, as one of the best securities to the rights and liberties of his loving subjects, and as most conducive to the honour of the Crown; and, with a view of securing them greater independence, he recommended that their tenure of office should no longer terminate on the demise of the Sovereign—a recommendation which was readily adopted by Parliament.

His tone, however, soon changed, and his true disposition quickly began to make itself apparent. Satu-

[1] See *Read's Weekly Journal*, 11th April 1761. [2] November 1760.

rated with the ideas of an autocrat, he determined to be King in fact, and not merely in name. Resolutely did he set his face against all popular claims or ambitions, resolutely did he refuse to submit to the guidance or even advice of his Ministers.

His first real act of administration was to get rid of his Whig Ministers, somewhat tentatively at first, removing some of those who occupied smaller offices, and replacing them with members of the Tory party, who, after long devotion to the expelled Stuart dynasty, had now become reconciled to an English-born sovereign, though of the house of Guelph. Soon his proceedings in this direction gathered pace. In March 1761, when Parliament was dissolved, Legge, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Pitt's colleague, was dismissed, and the Earl of Bute, a Scotchman and a Tory, was appointed Secretary of State; and so eager did the King soon become in the management of State affairs that, while the general election was pending, he went the length of interfering in the future composition of the House of Commons, by appropriating to himself a share in the nomination of members for the government boroughs—a proceeding which was then feasible, owing to the extraordinary system of popular representation existing at the time. At last the final blow of the change of policy was struck, and in October Pitt, the great Minister, was forced to resign—Pitt, who "was called to the Ministry by the voice of the people," who had held it with their approbation, and under whom, "for the first time, administration and popularity were seen united."

The description of the scene at the Cabinet which ended in this result is preserved for us in the pages of the *Annual Register*,[1] and is instructive in showing the

[1] *Annual Register*, 1761, p. 43.

spirit of the Ministers with whom Pitt had been associated, and who were to continue the Government when he ceased to be Minister.

Pitt had recommended an immediate as against a later declaration of war against Spain. "This was the time," he declared, "for humbling the whole house of Bourbon; that if this opportunity were let slip, it might never be recovered; and if he could not prevail in this instance, he was resolved that this was the last time he should sit in that Council. He thanked the Ministers of the late King for their support; said he was himself called to the Ministry by the voice of the people, to whom he considered himself as accountable for his conduct; and that he would no longer remain in a situation which made him responsible for measures he was no longer allowed to guide."

Lord Granville, who presided in this Council, made him this reply: "I find the gentleman is determined to leave us, nor can I say I am sorry for it, since he would otherwise have certainly compelled us to leave him; but if he be resolved to assume the right of advising his Majesty, and directing the operations of the war, to what purpose are we called to this Council? When he talks of being responsible to the people, he talks the language of the House of Commons, and forgets that at this board he is only responsible to the King."

"Or right or wrong," wrote a very acute political observer in the last century,[1] "from that moment, from the resignation of a servant 'given by the people to the King,' a distinction was formed between the views of the Court and the interests of the people."

It is evident from these facts—the supplanting of Whig Ministers with Tories, the manipulation of the

[1] *The History of Two Acts*, p. x.

constitution of the House of Commons by the King himself, and from the stupid sneer of the President of the Council about responsibility to the people—that neither the Sovereign, nor the Ministers, who were mere tools in his hands, would be disposed to tolerate any symptoms of independence on the part of the people, either in the public expression of their views on political measures, or still less in any political action, and that the Platform or the voice of the people would have to contend against the full strength of those great powers in the State.

Next in order to the Sovereign and his Ministers was the House of Lords. Tory as a whole, the Upper House contained, nevertheless, a considerable Liberal element; for many of the great noblemen of the country were constantly contending for their own power and authority, and were by no means disposed to submit to any encroachments of the authority of the Crown. But, except as using the people as an instrument against persons or measures hostile to themselves, they were little disposed to regard with favour any attempt on the part of the people really to assume power independent of them.

Lastly, there was the third estate of the realm—the House of Commons. That House ought to have been the guardian, and protector, and champion of the people, and of their interests, but, owing to causes hereafter fully described, it was at this period as hostile to them as either the Lords or the Sovereign, and was as intensely jealous of its own authority, and as vehemently resentful against any shadow of popular trespass or encroachment on its particular sphere, as even the most Tory member of the House of Lords, or the still more autocratic Sovereign on the throne could have wished.

The House of Commons consisted of 558 members—513 for England and Wales, and 45 for Scotland. The greater number of these 558 members owed their seats, not to election by the people, as might be inferred in the case of a country reputed to be possessed of a system of Parliamentary representation, but to direct nomination by the Minister of the day, to selection by great county magnates, or to nomination by the owners of boroughs, most of whom were, for lucre's sake, staunch supporters of the Ministers.

There was, however, in it also, as in the House of Lords, a popular element, the representatives of the few constituencies that were too large to be bribed, too fearless to be intimidated. This element, though small in numbers, contained men of the first talents, of the sincerest patriotism, and of the highest rank and wealth. Few though they were, they rendered the utmost service to the popular cause in discussing all the measures of the Government, and in informing such public opinion as there was of the merits or demerits of Government policy. But they were quite unable to cope successfully with the marshalled forces of the Government, and, accordingly, the majority of the House of Commons, and therefore, in effect, the House itself, was a pliant instrument in the hands of the Ministers of the Crown, and must practically be reckoned among the foes of the Platform and popular action.

There was thus a most formidable combination of forces arrayed against the Platform—King and King's Ministers, House of Lords and House of Commons, and those large numbers of people who were dependent on or attached to those powerful bodies or personages.

Formidable, however, as this array of powers and authorities undoubtedly was, there were forces at work

in the country which would not be deterred even by such opposition, but which, despite all, would gradually, though slowly, press forward and assert themselves.

The division of the two Houses of Parliament into parties, or rather into factions—uneven and unequal though that division was—led, when a general election occurred, to contests in the larger constituencies for Parliamentary representation, and these contests brought home at least to some sections of the people the import of some of the political questions of the time, awakened their interest, and incited them to take a more active part in political matters. Moreover, the growing tendencies and ambitions and desires of large sections of the people were all in the direction of taking greater interest in, and claiming a share in the government of the country of which they formed so important a part.

Once the people, or any portion of them, began to move at all in politics, or to agitate for any political measure, the need for public meeting and public speaking began, and the rise of the Platform became inevitable.

It might be contended that the system of representative government which was originally devised and adopted by the English people as that which would best secure them the self-government they so dearly prized, should have sufficed for all the natural or legitimate requirements of the people. But even had that system been perfect, which it was very far from being, it would have sufficed only for the consideration by the Legislature of the questions which the representatives brought before Parliament. Consultation and discussion among the people themselves were essential preliminaries to complaining, or to suggesting remedies. And it was just here that some farther means for public discussion

than those which existed at the time were required. The Press, useful though it was, only in part filled this function. More was wanted than even it could supply. The Platform alone held out the prospect of answering the popular requirements. It was, in fact, the one way by which the people could consult among themselves and render themselves articulate. The great example set by Parliament itself of meeting and discussing and settling the affairs of the nation was before them. What better example could they follow, what better course than meeting and discussing and saying their say when events occurred which closely and immediately affected themselves? Up to the end of the reign of George II. the people had submitted to the existing state of things.

But with the accession of a new King, and the opposition evoked and engendered by his autocratic policy, the tendencies of the people towards action in the political affairs of the nation became stronger and more persistent. They began to have recourse to the Platform, at first naturally and spontaneously, and later, as they learned to appreciate its advantages, and became familiar with its power.

It was not, however, without opposition, without discouragement, without long years of suffering, persecution, and grievous trials, that the people at last made good their right to the Platform as the medium of the expression of their will, as the instrument for supplying the deficiencies of the system of representative government, and ultimately as the censor and controller of Parliament itself.

The early part of George III.'s reign may, I think, be fairly assigned as the period in our history when the Platform began to make its appearance in public life—

when the seeds long dormant began to show above ground and to put forth their strength. Cases of popular clamour there had been previous to this date—such, for instance, as the agitation in 1733, when Sir Robert Walpole proposed a scheme of excise—but it was only in the commencement of the reign of George III. that the Platform assumed a definite shape or coherence as a system, and entered on a steadily progressive career, the various steps of which can be clearly and definitely traced. It was then, too, that there occurred what may be regarded as practically the earliest example of the system of Platform agitation in this country.

In March 1763 the Government of the day, with Pitt's successor, the Earl of Bute, as Prime Minister, introduced into Parliament a Bill imposing a tax upon Cider and Perry. This law conferred on the officers of Excise the right of entering and searching any private house where cider or perry might be made at any hour of the day or night. "This duty," wrote the *Annual Register* of that year, "was one concerning which very sober men might have had their doubts. It gave to all the discontented the fairest opportunity which could be furnished, of raising a popular clamour, and inflaming the whole nation." This opportunity was as fully availed of, as the circumstances of the times admitted. The proposal was received with the most intense indignation in the cider counties, and a great popular clamour arose at this outrageous infringement of the privacy and sanctity of a man's own home. The city of London, ever ready to take the lead in all measures of defence of public and private liberty, "whose ill-temper had always a most prevalent and extensive influence, exerted itself beyond the efforts of the most

"violent periods to prevent this scheme from passing into law,"[1] and the Lord Mayor, Aldermen, and Common Council "instructed" their representatives, in the most pressing terms, to oppose it, and "they successively petitioned every branch of the Legislature against it—a proceeding which, though by no means illegal or blamable, has no precedent that we can recollect."

Lord Bute was told that there was a Petition to be presented to the King. "Wounded to the quick by a resolution to carry the voice of the people to the throne without his intervention"[2] he offered, if they would stop the Petition, to have the Act repealed next session. The offer, however, came to nothing; the Bill was pressed on through the House of Lords, and the instant it emerged from there, the Petition to the King was presented.

The Petition most humbly showed "that the exposing private houses to be entered into and searched at pleasure, by persons unknown, will be a badge of slavery upon your people," and the petitioners humbly implored his Majesty not to give his assent to so much of the Bill as subjected the makers of perry or cider to excise laws. But it was in the cider counties themselves that the real Platform agitation took place. We get glimpses of it, with its meetings, in the meagre newspaper reports of the time, sufficient just to show us what it was like.

"Gloucester, 11th April.—On Saturday last an address of thanks was presented to Charles Barrow, M.P. for the town, by Deputation from a public meeting of a large number of his constituents, who drew up and signed the same at the Boothall in this city."[3] Two

[1] *Annual Register*, 1763, p. 35.

[2] *The History of the Minority*, etc., p. 110.

[3] See *The Public Advertiser*, 14th April 1763.

days later—"At a meeting of the gentlemen, clergy, and freeholders of the county of Gloucester, held at the Tolsey, in the city of Gloucester, on this day, it was unanimously resolved that the thanks of this meeting be given to Mr. Chester, the worthy representative of this county, for his zealous opposition to the Bill for laying an additional duty on Cider and Perry, to be paid by the maker, and levied by way of excise; that since the said Bill has, to the misfortune of this county, passed into a law, he be desired in the next Session of Parliament to exert his utmost endeavours to procure the repeal of that law; and that whosoever shall be chose to represent this county upon the present vacancy, be desired to join Mr. Chester in endeavouring to obtain the repeal of the said law."[1]

The contemporary writer in the *Annual Register* gives us some further particulars.

"Every method was taken to continue the ferment without doors. The fury of the populace was let loose, and everything was full of tumult and disorder. Virulent libels, audacious beyond the example of former licentiousness, were circulated through the nation, in which nothing was sacred, and no character was spared."

That the agitation must have reached a considerable height is evident when we are told that "the discontents which this Act produced in the cider counties seemed to threaten the internal peace of those parts, and Government was so seriously alarmed by the probability of popular tumults, that they immediately ordered several bodies of troops to march towards the different scenes of the expected disturbance, and there to form a line of some hundred miles in length, in order

[1] See *The Public Advertiser*, 24th April 1763.

to prevent any breaches of the peace, and to enforce the execution of this unconstitutional law."[1]

In the midst of this contention the Earl of Bute, the First Lord of the Treasury and the King's favourite, resigned.[2] The post of Prime Minister was conferred on George Grenville, but the plan of the administration was not changed, and the new Government was not disposed to repeal the objectionable tax. The agitation, though balked for a time, did not at once cease, for on 26th February 1766, three years later, several Petitions were presented to the Commons from the counties of Hereford, Worcester, Gloucester, Devon, Somerset, and others, for the repeal of the Act which imposed the tax. And now "so thoroughly had many gentlemen changed their sentiments with regard to this tax, or at least with regard to the mode of raising it, that the Bill for its repeal passed through both Houses, and received the Royal assent, without meeting with any considerable opposition in any part of its progress,"[3] and "this first victory was celebrated with every tumultuous demonstration of joy."

Here, then, we have on a small scale the first example of the action of the Platform with its attendant meetings to petition, meetings to thank existing representatives for conduct which was approved by their constituents, and meetings to fix qualifications for any new members, and what also is very memorable, the

[1] *The History of the Minority*, p. 125 (4th impression).

[2] Lord Liverpool (son of the Prime Minister) wrote: "My father has often told me that George III. and Lord Bute differed upon some point; that they had a meeting in Kew Gardens, that at that meeting the King urged Lord Bute upon this point, and that the King then told him, 'If you do not carry this matter out as I wish, we must part.' Lord Bute did not acquiesce, and Lord Bute left his place."—*The Croker Papers*, vol. iii. p. 177.

[3] *Parliamentary History*, 1766, vol. xvi. p. 206.

agitation was successful. The Platform had given the first proof of its utility.

It was an episode in our history but briefly referred to, or lightly treated by many historians who failed to discern its true import; yet was it of far greater consequence in the lessons it taught, and in the precedent it set, than many events on which they lavished pages of description.

A short time was to elapse after this successful inauguration of the Platform before the peace of the Government was again disturbed by its voice.

And here it may be remarked that from the very outset of its career down to the present time the one abiding object of the Platform has been to gain influence over the House of Commons.

There were two ways by which that influence could be gained: the first by influencing the electors in their choice of the component parts of the House of Commons—that is to say, in the election of the individual members of the House; and the other, by influencing members once they were in the House, and thus influencing the decisions of the House.

One incident which occurred in the year 1768 is most instructive in showing how little influence the Platform then exercised on the component parts of that House.

The mayor of the city of Oxford, in conjunction with the bailiffs and several of the aldermen, eighteen in all, calmly, and in a most business-like sort of way, wrote a letter under their common seal to the two sitting members, stating that they would elect them again at the next general election for a certain sum of money—£7500,[1]—and acquainting them, that unless they com-

[1] See the Weston MSS., *Parliamentary Papers*, 1885, vol. xliv. p. 410.

plied with that condition, they certainly should not meet with their support.[1] This letter was produced in the House by the members who received it, and there read. Instantly the pure and immaculate House flashed up into well-simulated anger. The opportunity of gaining the credit of virtue, by indignantly reproving its own vices in others, was too tempting to be lost. The writers of the letter were forthwith arrested by order of the House and committed to Newgate Prison; nor were they discharged until after a wholesome confinement, and after they had set forth their hearty sorrow and sincere contrition, and had been reprimanded on their knees by the Speaker,[2] in probably the most exquisitely Pharisaic speech in the whole history of English Parliamentary eloquence.

"A more enormous crime you could not well commit," said the Speaker, addressing the kneeling penitents in the presence of the whole House, "since a deeper wound could not have been given to the Constitution itself than by the open and dangerous attempt which you have made to subvert the freedom and independence of this House. The freedom of this House is the freedom of this country, which can continue no longer than while the voices of the electors are uninfluenced by any base or venal motive. For if abilities and integrity are no recommendation to the electors, if those who bid highest for their voices are to obtain them from such detestable considerations, this House will not be the representatives of the people of Great Britain. Instead of being the guardians and protectors of their liberties, instead of redressing the grievances of the subject, this House itself will be the author of the

[1] Oldfield's *Representative History*, vol. iv. p. 352.

[2] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xvi., 1768, 10th February.

"worst of grievances; it will become the venal instrument of power to reduce this happy nation, the envy and admiration of the world, to the lowest state of misery and servitude."

The picture of the House of Commons as given by the Speaker was incorrect only in this, that scarcely one word of what he said regarding the House was true. The House of Commons was almost the reverse of everything he depicted it. Abilities and integrity were, with few exceptions, no recommendation to the electors; those who bid highest for the voices of the electors did obtain them; and the House itself was the venal instrument of power to reduce the nation to the lowest state of misery and servitude—and the worst of the speech was this, that the Speaker himself must have known these things.

The composition of the House of Commons at that time was, it may be truly said, absolutely uninfluenced by the Platform, if we except two or three of the metropolitan constituencies.

An admirable description of the general features and spirit of the first Parliament in George III.'s reign was given in a letter which appeared in *The Gentleman's Magazine*[1] on the eve of the general election of 1768:—

"The time is now come when the people are acknowledged to be the fountain of power, and the constitution of this happy country reverts once more to its first principles. . . .

"It was, I think, the general and established rule to vote with the Treasury Bench, and as those who sat there were frequently changed in these last seven years, the resolutions of the House became as various and contradictory. 'No peace that shall leave the two

[1] See *The Gentleman's Magazine*, March 1768, p. 114.

branches of the house of Bourbon united,' says one Minister: 'War everlasting,' echoed the worthy representatives of the people. 'Peace on any terms,' says the favourite Minister: 'We are an undone bankrupt nation!' cried the House. 'Cider ought to be taxed!' declared the same genius: 'Double tax cider, by all means,' answered the Parliament. 'It was a damned thing to tax cider!' exclaims the next dictator: 'Ay, damn the cider taxers and all their friends,' replied the Commons of Great Britain.

"'America should pay her proportion of her own expenses,' says the great finance Minister. 'Nothing so reasonable!' cries Parliament; 'we won't hear a word against it.' 'America pays too much already; . . . take off their taxes and allow them to trade with other nations,' were the opinions of the next in order. 'Repeal, repeal; no taxes, no duties! and free ports for America,' resounded through St. Stephen's Chapel. It would be endless to recapitulate all the instances of the most shameless servility, and want of principle, in the wretched tools we have just got rid of. I hope we shall never see their like again."

The hope thus expressed was unfortunately a vain one.

At the general election which took place in 1768, at the end of the septennial period of Parliamentary existence, the old crew of "King's friends,"—sinecure-holders, place-hunters, jobbers, and boroughmongers,—all came trooping back elected, nominated, or appointed by themselves. "The buying and selling of seats," says Lord Stanhope, "was probably more prevalent, and certainly more public and notorious than in any former general election.[1]

[1] Lord Stanhope's *History of England*, vol. v. p. 288.

"I fear," wrote Weston on the 10th December 1767 to his friend Underwood,[1] "there is no room to doubt but the vile traffic you mention is more generally practised than it ever was. The instances you talked of appear to me more numerous and of greater magnitude than I remember to have heard of at any former period."

These statements present at best a gruesome picture, but we can form from them an idea of the position of the Platform: On one side, high hills of prerogative and pretensions which would have to be laid low; on the other, pestiferous valleys of corruption and abomination which would have to be filled up, before the work of the Platform should be accomplished, and the government of the country brought into the people's own hands.

Reform or progress must have seemed well-nigh hopeless then to men desirous of reform, for a vicious circle existed which appeared to preclude the possibility of making even a beginning. If men bribed electors to return them to Parliament, and if the electors were willing to be bribed, and to leave their representatives a free hand in Parliament, what end was there to be to it? Where could argument or reason or anything else intervene?

There was, it is true, a small leaven of independent constituencies, there was a small leaven also of independent members of Parliament, and a small leaven of independent electors; but was it possible that they could ever grow to such strength as to leaven the mass?

One hopeful sign there was of a political awakening of the people at this election of 1768—a considerable increase in the number of contests as compared with 1761,—hopeful, because every contest gave an impetus

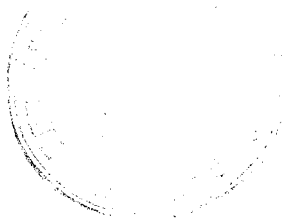
[1] See Weston MSS., *Parliamentary Papers*, 1885, vol. xliv. p. 409.

to the Platform, and, for a brief time, awakened or stirred the political feelings and curiosity of the people. Even those who were not electors became participators in the bustle and excitement of an election, and thus the circle of political ambitions and knowledge widened. Some fifty-eight or sixty contests took place,[1] of which eight were in counties,[2] and about sixteen in borough constituencies of a respectable size.

Amongst these contests was one for ever memorable —that for the county of Middlesex—which resulted in the return to Parliament of John Wilkes, and in the establishment of the Platform once and for ever as the mouthpiece of the people.

[1] See *The Political Register*, by Almon, vol. iii. p. 341.

[2] Berkshire, Cumberland, Derbyshire, Essex, Huntingdon, Middlesex, Norfolk, and Westmoreland.



CHAPTER II

THE FIRST GREAT PLATFORM CAMPAIGN

THE Middlesex election of 1768, remarkable in many ways, is most of all memorable for having brought the Platform so prominently and conspicuously before the entire country as to rivet public attention on it, and to prevent its ever after fading into oblivion. In every way the action of the Platform on this occasion displayed an enormous advance on its previous effort. In the agitation against the cider tax which has just been described, the Platform had been resorted to only to a limited extent—scarcely a report of its proceedings finding its way into the Press—and the question at issue had been comparatively a small one, affecting only a few counties in the south and west of England. In the agitation which sprang from this Middlesex election, and which may justly be described as the first great Platform campaign, a constitutional principle of the most vital consequence was involved, affecting not merely a few counties, but every county and borough constituency in Great Britain, and every Parliamentary elector in the country. The actual struggle was between no less important combatants than the House of Commons on the one side, and one of the foremost constituencies in the country on the other, and the

various incidents were fully chronicled in the newspaper Press of the time, and circulated far and wide.

To trace the struggle from the beginning, it is necessary to go back a few years, for the earlier incidents in connection with it occurred in the period described in the last chapter.

The central figure in the strife on the popular side—Fate's puppet as it were—was John Wilkes. He had been elected to and sat in the first Parliament of George III.'s reign as member for Aylesbury. In 1762 he founded a periodical paper called *The North Briton*, which he made the vehicle for vehement attacks on the Government. On the 23d April 1763 the celebrated "Number 45" of that paper appeared, containing a severe criticism on the King's speech, but throwing all the blame on the Ministers, who, according to the theory of the Constitution, were responsible for it. So daring a liberty was construed by the Tory Ministers into an attack on the King himself, and could not for a moment be tolerated by the then Government. A "General Warrant"[1] was issued by the Secretary of State, directing the arrest of the authors, printers, and publishers of the paper, without even naming or describing them, and it having been ascertained that Wilkes was the author of the obnoxious article, he was seized and sent to the Tower. He obtained a writ of habeas corpus, and was released by the Court of Common Pleas, which decided that, being a member of the House of Commons, the privilege of Parliament had been violated in his person.

[1] Burgh, in his *Disquisitions* (vol. iii. p. 252, 1775), has described what a General Warrant was. "General Warrants are not a whit more reconcilable to liberty than the French King's Lettres de Cachet. A General Warrant lays half the people of a town at the mercy of a set of ruffian officers, let loose upon them by a Secretary of State, who assumes over the persons and papers of the most innocent a power which a British King dares not assume, and delegates it to the dregs of the people."

The King and his Ministers, however, were not to be thus easily baulked of revenge, and a formal prosecution was forthwith instituted against him for libel.

In January 1764, during his absence in France, whither he had gone for his health, he was expelled from the House of Commons for having written "a scandalous and seditious libel," the "libel" being a paper which had been only written and had never been published, and which had been stolen from his house at the instigation of one of the Ministers. A little later the prosecution resulted in his conviction, and as he did not appear to receive sentence, he was outlawed. The people regarded the vindictive and high-handed proceedings of his opponents as nothing less than persecution, and extended to him their full sympathy. But out of sight abroad, he was soon more or less out of mind. Not, however, for long.

In 1768, the seven years of the life of Parliament having expired, he returned home, and on the very eve of the general election appeared on the hustings in Guildhall, and declared himself a candidate for the city of London.

Beaten there, he at once announced his intention of standing for Middlesex, then a populous constituency, which he did, and he was returned for that county at the top of the poll. As an outlaw he could not have legally stood for Parliament; but the Lord Chief-Justice having decided that the outlawry was illegal, he was freed from all disqualification on that account; and to purge himself throughly from all appearance of opposition to the law, he surrendered to receive and undergo the sentence of imprisonment which was hanging over him. How angry the King was at his election may be gathered from his letter to Lord North, the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

"I think it highly proper to apprise you," wrote the King, "that the expulsion of Mr. Wilkes appears to be very essential, and must be effected.[1]"

Whilst in prison, Wilkes addressed a letter to the Secretary of State on the subject of the riots which ensued on his imprisonment, and on the high-handed action of the military; and when Parliament met in the following year the House of Commons, incited thereto by the King, on the 3d of February 1769, voted this letter "an insolent and scandalous and seditious libel,"[2] and upon motion made he was expelled the House by 219 votes against 137, a majority of 82, "which is a much smaller one than one could either wish or expect on such an occasion." Expelling him was one thing, preventing his re-election was quite another. He offered himself again for election, and in his address to the electors he very pointedly remarked "If once the Ministry shall be permitted to say whom the freeholders shall not choose, the next step will be to tell them whom they shall choose."

Within a fortnight he was re-elected. The very next day the now irate House of Commons took the momentous decision which was the cause of all the subsequent trouble, and voted by a mere resolution that having been expelled, he was incapable of sitting in the same Parliament, and that "the election was therefore void." This view was not accepted by the electors of Middlesex, who, on the contrary, in the next month, with much determination and enthusiasm re-elected him unanimously. On the day following this re-election, so hot now was the temper of the King, King's

[1] See *The Correspondence of King George the Third with Lord North.* King to North, 25th April 1768, vol. i. p. 2.

[2] *Parliamentary History,* vol. xvi. p. 545.

Ministers, and "King's friends," the House of Commons again declared his election void, and again a new writ was issued. This time a Colonel Luttrell was put up by the King and the Ministry (with a promise to pay his election expenses) to oppose Wilkes. At this election[1] Colonel Luttrell got 296 votes against Wilkes's 1143, and the House of Commons having already declared Wilkes disqualified from being returned, decided that Colonel Luttrell was duly elected, and gave him the seat.

"The action of the House of Commons," wrote the King complacently to Lord North,[2] "must greatly tend to destroy that outrageous licentiousness that has been so successfully raised by wicked and disappointed men."

Other less one-sided men than the autocratic sovereign who wanted to have everything his own way thought differently, and, as the sequel proved, more correctly. The action of the House of Commons had quite a different result from what the King anticipated. No public measure, we are told, since the accession of the House of Hanover excited so general an alarm, or caused so universal a discontent.[3] The gist of the dispute lay in this—that the chosen and elected representative of the electors of Middlesex was not disqualified from sitting in Parliament by any existing law, but solely by a resolution of the House of Commons. Therefore to exclude him without statutory authority, and to seat another candidate in his place, was to make a resolution of the House of Commons equal in effect to an Act of Parliament—that is to say, equal to a law made by both Houses of Parliament and

[1] 13th April 1769.

[2] *Correspondence between George III. and Lord North*, vol. i. p. 9.

[3] See *The Annual Register*, 1769, p. 68*.

the Crown. If such a thing as this could be done, and if a practically irresponsible House of Commons could erect itself into a despotic power more dangerous even than the Crown itself, there was an end to the Constitution, to the whole system of representation, and to freedom of election.

The quarrel undoubtedly was a very serious one. A corrupt and subservient House of Commons, ordered by the Ministers, who were directed by the King himself, had come into contest with one of the most populous, powerful, and intelligent constituencies in the kingdom, and in that contest was involved absolutely the most vital of all the rights of the people, that of selecting their own representatives. No event could by any human ingenuity have been contrived more calculated to evoke a powerful expression of popular opinion.

That the King and Government should provoke such a quarrel shows the overweening sense they had of their own power, and the contempt they had for the people. The result must have come upon them as a disagreeable surprise. For the first time in the history of the country the Platform was appealed to on a widely extended scale; it was adopted by the popular party as a weapon both of defence and offence, and was employed as a political engine, with the deliberate and avowed object of directly contesting and influencing the action of Parliament. Many people who up to this had been impassive and easy-going, felt the greatness of the provocation given them by the Government, and the importance of the issue, and they gathered together in public meetings in a manner hitherto unknown. Their voice was expressed by the Platform, with a vigour and determination quite unprecedented, and was conveyed

to Parliament by Petitions in language far less deferential than usual, and that must have jarred strangely on royal and Ministerial ears. Startling events these, pregnant with consequences to be felt for ever through the history of our country.

Of Wilkes's personal character it is unnecessary to speak. Bad as it was, it was forgotten under or condoned by the persecution he endured. It is strange how often in history a person of indifferent or even bad character is the champion or figurehead of a great principle. From 1769 to 1772 "he was the sole unrivalled idol of the people, who lavished on him all in their power to bestow, as if willing to prove that in England it was possible for an individual to be great and important through them alone."

The popular excitement increased. "As to the Wilkemania," wrote Sedgwick to Weston on the 4th March, "Heaven only knows how long it will rage, how far it will extend, or what will be the end of it! Far from showing any symptoms of abatement it seems spreading upward to classes which are not usually liable to the infection of popular frenzy,"[1] and referring to "the great Mr. Edmund Burke," who had already shown his intention of supporting the popular cause, he adds, "Is it not most extraordinary that a man of such distinguished knowledge should join the incendiary and his rabble? and is not their acquisition of such a leader strong encouragement to acts of greater audacity?"

A detailed description of some few of the meetings enables us to form a fairly accurate idea of the agitation as a whole, and of the action of the Platform.

It was on the 16th of April 1769 that the House of Commons declared that Colonel Luttrell was duly elected.

[1] Weston MSS., *Parliamentary Papers*, vol. xliv. 1885, p. 413.

On the very next day the Platform broke silence. A numerous body, some 800 or upwards, of the freeholders of the county of Middlesex met at the Assembly Rooms at Mile-end, to consider the proper measures to be pursued for maintaining the freedom of elections, and for supporting their rights and privileges.

The movement was so natural and spontaneous that it is evident this was not the first time they had assembled together.

The chair was taken by Mr. Sawbridge, who stated that the reason of their being called together was to consider of ways and means to seek for redress against the invaders of their right of election; he submitted to them to consider and propose what the law and constitution would enable them to do to prevent the fatal consequences of their yielding to the methods that had been taken to set aside a representative duly chosen by the legal electors of any county or place. A Mr. Townsend, M.P., then made "a very elegant and animated speech," and proposed that a committee of 100 freeholders should be chosen to consider what measures should be adopted for obtaining the redress of their grievances, and for fixing on a plan that might serve to confirm to them the rights (if there were any) that still remained unviolated, and to recover those which had been violently and unjustly wrested from them, especially that important leading right on which all others depended—the right of election. The Rev. Mr. Horne, Wilkes's most vigorous and ardent supporter, afterwards better known as Horne-Tooke, made a strong speech. Some further motions were proposed, and all being carried, the meeting adjourned to the 27th of April.[1] On that day they again met,

[1] *The Political Register*, by Almon, vol. iv. p. 296.

and after several speeches an address which had been composed in the meantime (by Mr. Horne) was approved and signed. The address was not to the House of Commons, but to the King, and, far from confining itself to the mere question of Wilkes's rejection by the House of Commons, contained a long list of grievances, a regular letting loose of the pent-up waters of bitterness.[1] The King's opinion that the action of the House of Commons would destroy "that outrageous licentiousness" was scarcely becoming verified. The petitioners asserted that they had seen English subjects, and even a member of the Legislature, arrested by a "general warrant," issued by a Secretary of State, contrary to the law of the land; their houses rifled and plundered, their papers seized, and used as evidence upon trial, and their bodies committed to close imprisonment, the Habeas Corpus eluded, trial by jury discountenanced, petitions treated unjustly, by the selection only of such parts as might be wrested to criminate the petitioner, and the refusal to hear those which might procure redress; mobs and riots hired and raised by the Ministry, in order to justify and recommend their own illegal proceedings, and to prejudice his Majesty's mind by false insinuations against the loyalty of his Majesty's subjects; the freedom of election violated by corrupt and undue influence; resolutions of one branch of the Legislature set up as the law of the land; public money shamefully squandered and unaccounted for; and a host of other grievances too numerous to be detailed here. "We see ourselves deprived even of the franchises of Englishmen, reduced to the most abject state of slavery," they said, and they besought his Majesty "to banish

[1] For a copy of the Petition see *The Political Register*, by Almon, vol. iv. p. 347.

those evil and pernicious counsellors whose suggestions tend to deprive your people of their dearest and most essential rights."

One can picture to one's self the stamping wrath with which these statements, most of which were true, must have been read by the Sovereign and his Ministers—those "evil and pernicious counsellors." What audacity that the sufferers should dare to state their grievances; how outrageous that they should resent unjust treatment, or venture to call in question the actions of the Government; how still more irritating that full reports of the meetings, and of the speeches, and a copy of the abominable address should be blazoned forth throughout the land by the Press.

"It is surely in some parts the most impudent paper that ever was penned," wrote Sedgwick to Weston; "it seems well calculated to inflame the multitude."

It was not, however, the statement of grievances that was likely to inflame the multitude, but the grievances themselves.

Had the affair ended here it would have been unpleasant enough to those in authority; but it was only beginning instead of ending.

The reports of the speeches at the meetings, and the copy of the Address, which were published in the papers and spread far and wide, gave plenty of material for thought to fresh numbers of the people, and raised many suggestive questions.

"I see," wrote Sedgwick to Weston on the 12th June, "they are spreading the contagion by circular letters."[1]

Some two months later the contagion appears to have so far spread that the citizens of London held a

[1] See Weston MSS., *Parliamentary Papers*, 1885, vol. xliv. p. 415.

meeting at the Guildhall to "Address" or "Petition" as the Middlesex freeholders had done. A letter of Edmund Burke, presumably to Lord Rockingham, gives a very graphic account of the meeting, and teaches us something of the Platform at this time.[1]

"This day," he wrote, "I squeezed myself into Guildhall, where I remained until four o'clock, and I assure you that I am not much more than barely alive."

. . . . . .

"Mr. Lovell (the author of the Petition to which the Livery agreed) made a speech; not a bad one, had it been less oratorical. Indeed, I am rather rash in saying so, for when he bawled, as a true orator ought, I did not very well hear him; when he spoke under his voice I heard him very distinctly. He ended by reading the Petition. It is in substance the same as that from Middlesex, but I think it brings it more home to the King's Ministers, not the present only, but the past; and calls for redress in very strong terms. It has all the absurdities of the Middlesex Petition, but I think that it is a more direct attack, better pointed, and in most places better expressed; when the Petition was read, the mayor came forward and desired an alteration in the Bill" (Petition ?) "by leaving out the words Lord Mayor. There was some hissing; however Mr. Pearson read it so altered, and then a motion was made, that the mayor and sheriffs be desired to deliver the Petition to the King, and that the *four* members be requested to attend the mayor. Ladbroke came forward, and after a good deal of clapping and hissing, he told them that he spoke merely to signify his intention

[1] See *Memoirs of the Marquis of Rockingham*, by the Earl of Albemarle, vol. ii. p. 96.

of obeying their commands. The applause was then general and unmixed.

"Beckford made his usual speech—short Parliaments—every article of the Petition true—some articles true—most articles true—all that he had heard true—heard very little—his duty to obey any commands of his constituents, provided they are wise and reasonable commands, and so forth. However, one expression he did use, which I think bold: that 'all our misfortunes arose from a corrupt and venal Parliament.'

"Trecothick then spoke, but I did not hear a single word. The applause, however, was as full as if all had been heard. It was indeed very great, and nothing but that given to Beckford could exceed it. On the question for the Petition there was not a single hand against it. One man, indeed, attempted to make a speech in opposition to it, but his voice was drowned in a cry to throw him off the hustings. Thus it was carried with all possible triumph and exultation. The conduct and management was able, and except the clamour of applause and censure, nothing resembling tumult, considering the assembly and the occasion.

"If the Ministry can stand this the people have no influence."

A couple of days later, "the gentlemen, clergy, and freeholders of the county of Surrey" met at Epsom to consider the best constitutional measures to be taken in support of the right of elections, and adopted a petition to the King. By August the country was beginning to move in the matter. The freeholders of Worcestershire met and petitioned.

"We see," wrote the Worcester freeholders, "nothing in this case which may not become our own. It appears to us the common cause of all the electors of Great

"Britain, against the wicked designs of a set of men who have contrived by evil practices and treacherous artifices to deceive and surprise the representatives of your people into a conduct repugnant to the ends of their institution, and destructive of those rights which they were expressly intended to support."[1]

Then the electors of Westminster, to the number of 7000, met in Westminster Hall, and after listening to speeches adopted a petition to the King.[2]

In September a very respectable meeting of the freeholders of Buckinghamshire assembled at Aylesbury, Edmund Burke being among the number of those present, he being at this time an energetic supporter of the Platform.[3] A short time previously he had written to Lord Rockingham, to whom he was Private Secretary: "It is the intention of the Ministry, and it will be in their power, in case the petitioners should be comparatively few, to make an example of terror to all future attempts of expressing the sense of the people in any other way than by the votes of the House of Commons. . . . If we mean to get *redress* we must strengthen the hands of the minority within doors, by the accession of the public opinion strongly declared to the Court, which is the source of the whole mischief."

And after the meeting he wrote: "The town hall was quite full, not fewer than 400, many of them substantial people"; this too, "though everything had been done to traverse us; the terrors of the House of Commons were held over many, and the word was, 'The King will despise your Petitions, and then what will you do? Will you go into rebellion?'"

[1] See Almon's *Political Register*. vol. v. p. 119.

[2] Copies of the Petitions from Bristol, Cornwall, Derbyshire, Hereford, Worcestershire, and Liverpool are given, vol. v. p. 115 of *The Political Register*, by Almon, 1770.

[3] Burke's *Works*, vol. i. p. 91 (1852).

A few days later several noblemen and gentlemen of the county of Gloucester met, and then Devon, Somerset, and several other counties, and Bristol, Exeter, and several other towns, held their meetings, and both by the Platform and by Petition joined in the general protest.[1]

It is interesting, in this the first extensive Platform agitation, to look behind the scenes at the discussions of the leaders of the popular party as to the best line of action to be taken in the circumstances. All appear to have been in favour of meetings and Platforming, though there was some little difference of opinion as to the policy to be advocated from the Platform and the action to be taken by the meetings.[2]

Lord Rockingham had no difficulty in approving the mode of petitioning the Crown "as being the only adequate and proper measure"; and Burke gave his voice in favour of this course rather than that of "instructions to their representatives." "I confess," he wrote, "I am, when the objects are well chosen, rather more fond of the method of petition, because it carries more the air of uniformity and concurrence, and being more out of the common road, and yet, I apprehend, constitutional enough, it will be more striking and more suitable to the magnitude of the occasion."[3]

Lord Rockingham, Wedderburn, and Lee sketched out a Petition for the meeting which was about to be held in York, but Sir G. Savile, one of the members of that county, pointed out the objection to petitioning the King for dissolution, namely, "that it was against the stream of the Constitution to call on the Crown for help against the House of Commons, and that trying to

[1] See also *Memoirs of the Reign of George III.*, by Horace Walpole, vol. iii.

[2] *Rockingham Memoirs*, vol. ii. p. 105.

[3] Burke's *Works*, vol. i. p. 85.

"lessen the power of the House of Commons was always lessening liberty;" but he evidently attached little real importance to the objection, for the same plan was among the three courses of action which he himself suggested, namely, to petition the King for dissolution, the House of Commons for a rehearing, or to give instructions to their members.

Ultimately the course adopted was to recommend a Petition to the Crown for a new choice of representatives. Sir G. Savile attended the meeting at York, for which this Petition had been drafted, and he afterwards wrote describing it: "The number of persons at the meeting is differently guessed at, but I fancy 800 is as near the mark as any, and the property very considerable. Sir G. Armytage opened, by requesting the two members would give an account of the transaction, their opinion upon it, and their notions of a remedy. After we had done, he moved a Petition, was seconded by Sir C. Wray; and here it had like to have ended unanimous, had not one person expressed a desire to be heard against it. This gave Wedderburn an opportunity of answering, which he did in a pretty long speech, and very well. Three hands were held up on the first question, but on the final one it was *nem. con.* The proposed Petition was then read, which is, I think, in every respect by a great deal the best of any yet produced in any county; indeed, I think, the only one that is correct and constitutionally to the point."[1]

Certainly this display of popular feeling, with its appeal to public meetings, and its startlingly sudden adoption of the Platform as a political weapon, was an astonishing event, though it was quite true, as remarked at the time by Sir John Cavendish, member for York-

[1] *Rockingham Memoirs*, vol. ii. p. 136.

shire : " In public matters there is no other method of collecting the sense of the people than by meetings of that sort."

This, however, was a truth new to most people, and which had not as yet gained any extended recognition.

A very remarkable circumstance of this struggle was that the contest was one ostensibly between the people and their own House of Parliament.

In Edmund Burke's opinion " the true contest was between the electors of the Kingdom and the Crown, the Crown acting by the instrumental House of Commons ; " and Burgh, in his *Political Disquisitions*, said : " In our time the opposition is between a corrupt Court joined by an innumerable multitude of all ranks and stations bought with public money, and the independent part of the nation." [1]

It mattered little, however, in reality whether it was against the Crown or the House of Commons that the Platform was actually striving. The evident fact was that the House of Commons, at the bidding of the Crown, had arrogated to itself a power to which it was in no way entitled, and the public indignation, which found such strong vent through the Platform, arose from astonishment that the House of Commons should be able to do such a thing, and should be capable of doing it. That was a revelation of a danger to which the people were not disposed to submit without vigorous protest ; and here were large numbers of them publicly meeting and expressing themselves without reserve. Seventeen counties, and numerous cities and boroughs, held meetings and petitioned, and the Petitions, it was said, were signed by upwards of 65,000 of the electors—

[1] *Political Disquisitions, or an Enquiry into Public Errors, Defects, and Abuses*, by T. Burgh. (London, 1774.)

a formidable display of opinion in those times of our history.

The influence of the Platform on the House of Commons being the principal test of its power, it is desirable to ascertain what was the effect of the agitation on that House, and on the Government.

The effect was considerable. First of all, the meeting of Parliament was postponed beyond the usual time. That in itself showed that the Government was not quite comfortable in its mind, and that it rather feared the debates which were sure to be raised.

Horace Walpole, the gossipy recorder of the political events of the day, wrote on the 6th November:[1] "The imprudence of postponing Parliament till after Christmas has given time for a large number of Petitions, and more perhaps will follow, yet I do not think the general spirit so violent as it should seem from these appearances. It is impossible but some mob may be assembled everywhere to sign a Petition, and then such Petition is called the sense of the country, though in many it is nothing less; and besides the Scotch counties the majority have not petitioned. The Court will, nay must, resist the dissolution of the Parliament."

But alarmed as the Court was, and irritated as Ministers were, the King in his speech at the beginning of the session, which was opened on the 9th January, ignored completely the whole agitation, and made no reference to the meetings, to the Platform speeches, or to the Petitions. Perhaps he took the view sneeringly expressed by Walpole in his letter of 31st December: "The Petitions have contracted an air of ridicule from the ridiculous undertakers that have been forced to parade into different counties to supply the place of all

[1] See Horace Walpole's *Letters*, vol. v. p. 200.

the gentlemen who have disdained to appear and countenance them."[1] Perhaps he wished to show his contempt for the meetings and petitions by refusing to notice them. Though it was within his power to do this much, his authority was not sufficient to prevent the subject being debated in Parliament, and the very day the Session opened, Lord Chatham, still the redoubtable champion of popular ideas, moved an amendment to the address in the House of Lords to the effect that the House of Lords would take into their most serious consideration the causes of the discontents which prevail, and particularly the late proceedings in the House of Commons relative to the Middlesex election.[2] He declared that "the alarming state of the nation called upon him, forced him, to come forward to execute that duty which he owed to God, to his sovereign, and to his country. . . . The liberty of the subject is invaded, not only in provinces, but here at home. The English people are loud in their complaints; they proclaim with one voice the injuries they have received, they demand redress, and, depend upon it, my Lords, they will have redress. They will never return to a state of tranquillity until they are redressed; nor ought they, for, in my judgment, my Lords,—and I speak it boldly—it were better for them to perish in a glorious contention for their rights than to purchase a slavish tranquillity at the expense of a single iota of the Constitution. . . . Great pains have been taken to alarm us with the consequences of a difference between the two Houses of Parliament; but if apprehensions of this kind are to affect us, let us consider which we ought

[1] See Horace Walpole's *Letters*, vol. v. p. 210.

[2] *Parliamentary History*, 1770, vol. xvi. p. 648.

"to respect most—the representative or the collective body of the people. My Lords, five hundred gentlemen are not ten millions, and if we must have a contention, let us take care to have the English nation on our side."[1]

That Lord Chatham should emerge from the retirement in which he had for some time lived, to take part in the battle, was in itself a tribute to the power of the Platform; but even greater tribute was the speech of so high and conspicuous a personage as the Lord Chancellor (Camden), an actual member of the Government, who, in the course of the debate, said: "That for some time he had beheld, with silent indignation, the arbitrary measures which were pursuing by the Ministry; that he would do so no longer, but would openly and boldly speak his sentiments. That as to the incapacitating vote by the House of Commons, he considered it as a direct attack on the first principles of the Constitution; and that if, in giving his decision as judge, he was to pay any regard to that vote, or any other vote of the House of Commons, in opposition to the known and established laws of the land, he should look upon himself as a traitor to his trust, and an enemy to his country; that the Ministry, by their violent and tyrannical conduct, had alienated the minds of the people from his Majesty's Government; that, in consequence, a spirit of discontent had spread itself into every corner of the kingdom, and was every day increasing."[2]

Damning as was the debate to the credit and conduct of the Government, Ministers had an easy triumph in the House of Lords in everything but

[1] *Parliamentary History*, 1770, vol. xvi. p. 663.

[2] See *The Gentleman's Magazine* for January 1770.

right and argument, and Lord Chatham's proposed amendment to the Address was defeated.

The real struggle took place in the House of Commons, though here too, owing to the phalanx of the "King's friends," of placemen, and of pensioners, the issue was never for a moment in doubt. Mr. Dowdeswell, with somewhat grim satire, proposed to acquaint his Majesty of the necessity of immediately inquiring into the causes of the unhappy discontents which prevailed in every part of his Majesty's dominions.[1]

The debate showed the bitter resentment and the deep-rooted hostility that prevailed at this period against any action by the people. The most ridiculous arguments were put forward by numerous speakers to crush the agitation, or to cover with obloquy those who had taken part in it.

The Attorney-General (De Grey), in defending the Government, said: "Of the contrivance to support the demand by Petitions for the dissolution of Parliament, I shall not at present deliver my opinion. I shall not declare whether I think those who signed them culpable or punishable."[2] And then he went on to lay down a principle which has been consistently held ever since by every opponent to the just claims of the people, and which if admitted would have struck a fatal blow at the Platform. "This House," he said, "once chosen, is, to all legal and constitutional purposes, the people collectively, and to suppose their judicial proceedings, when chosen, to be cognisable by any number of the individuals who have chosen them, is to subvert our Constitution from the root."

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xvi. p. 680.

[2] *Ibid.* p. 685.

Loathsome is the hypocrisy of these men accusing others of subverting the Constitution whilst they themselves were actually at work subverting it for their own sordid ends. Mr. Charles Jenkinson said: "The people who complain of the decisions of this House cannot be judges of the motives that lead to those decisions. They hear but one side of the question. Those gentlemen who are active in spiriting up the people to an opposition, do not fairly represent things. At their meetings to harangue them, they only inform them of what they themselves have said in this House, or what they have been told others of the same sentiments have said; but they carefully conceal, or intentionally misrepresent, what has been urged on the other side of the question. Surely this is not a fair way of proceeding. . . . To found the authority of this House upon the popular voice is vain and idle."

Another De Grey, Thomas, by name, outdid even his namesake, the Attorney-General, in violence and virulence. "Will any man say," he exclaimed, "that the late Petitions are promoted by men of worth and probity? The Petition from Westminster is a demonstration to the contrary. Of 25,000 respectable inhabitants, two only, in the rank of gentlemen, could be found to countenance the Petition. Every member of this House can tell by whom and by what means the Westminster Petition was obtained. They know that a ferment was kept up by a few despicable mechanics, headed by base-born people, booksellers, and broken tradesmen, and that the Petition was signed by the scum of the earth—the refuse of the people unworthy to enter the gates of his Majesty's palace."

Mr. George Onslow said: "I am of opinion that the petitioners are not men of property either in West-

minster or elsewhere. In Surrey not a tenth part of those who are styled gentlemen put their hands to the Petition."

Mr. Rigby, a member for a nomination borough, alarmed evidently at the first symptom of a political awakening of the people, exclaimed, "If it were not for petition-hunters who travel from north to south, and from east to west, who tell them that there are grievances which they do not feel, and apprehensions which they do not conceive, I am sure the name of a Petition would never have been heard in more than three counties throughout the kingdom. If it were not for the officious diligence of these incendiaries, how is it possible, that the farmers and weavers in Yorkshire, and Cumberland, should know, or take an interest in the Middlesex election of representatives in Parliament? It is impossible that of themselves they could ever think even of asking a question upon the subject; but a few factious and discontented people, who have no way of making themselves of consequence but by distressing Government, go round the country; meetings are advertised, speeches made, the Parliament abused, Government vilified, and the people inflamed; a Petition ready drawn up is produced and read, and before the ferment subsides, it is hawked about from one town to another, till a sufficient number of names are collected to make a show; and then it is passed for the sense and act of the people. To pretend that any attention is due to Petitions thus fraudulently obtained is an insult upon common sense; but," continued this irate member of the House, who, being a borough owner nominee, felt himself at liberty to abuse all electors, "supposing that a majority of freeholders had signed these Petitions without influence or solicitation, the majority, even of

"this class, is no better than an ignorant multitude whom it is absurd in the highest degree to suppose capable of deciding upon a question, about which the best lawyers, and the ablest men in the House are still divided. Let the infamous abettors of sedition blush at their appeal to such a tribunal. If the authority of the House is to be called in question by people of this class, if we suffer our proceedings to be controlled and directed by popular clamour, excited by factious invective and misrepresentation, we must bid adieu to all government by law, and depend for protection upon the caprice of the multitude."[1]

But the speaking was not to be all on one side, and, fortunately for the liberties of Englishmen, free speech, though much hampered out of doors, was still permitted in the House of Commons. Sir G. Savile, one of the popular members for Yorkshire, braved the Ministerial henchmen. "I do not say that the vote of expulsion, which was the beginning of sorrows, was the offspring of corruption; nor do I say that the majority of this House sold the rights of their constituents, but I do say it, have said it, and will always say it, that they have betrayed them. . . . The people are not such ignorant dupes, as certain wiseacres would represent them. They understand their own rights, and know their own interests as well as we do. . . . I again say, that this House has betrayed the rights of its constituents."[2]

The Marquis of Granby, holding the high appointment of Commander-in-Chief, referred to his having voted for Colonel Luttrell being given the seat, and said, "That he should always lament that vote which he gave as the greatest misfortune of his life."

These speeches stung the Government into further

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xvi. p. 698. [2] *Ibid.* p. 699.

reply, and the wrath of the Cabinet, and the indignation of the King, blaze forth through the speech of his most trusted and confidential servant, Lord North, member for the rotten borough of Banbury, not quite yet Prime Minister, but soon to be. He said, "The charge of alienating the affections of the people from their sovereign must come with a very ill grace from the leaders of the opposition, who are incessantly labouring to persuade them that he does not deserve their affection, by speeches and writings beyond all example virulent and inflammatory; from those factious spirits, the only genuine malcontents in the kingdom, who run from place to place, collect a crowd together, and abuse the credulous people by abusing alike his Majesty and his Ministers.[1] If his Majesty's subjects are disaffected, those trumpeters of sedition have produced the disaffection; and it is nothing more than the effect of their artifices that they retort as a reproach upon administration. . . . The servants of the Crown are indeed threatened with the fury of the multitude, and the drunken ragamuffins of a vociferous mob are exalted into equal importance with men of the coolest judgment, the best morals, and the greatest property in the kingdom. . . .

"It is the glory of the present administration that, as they make no encroachments upon the rights of the people, they will suffer none upon the power of the Legislature. This House has hitherto possessed the sole power of judging in all cases respecting the rights of electing its own members; and this power, as it never ought, never shall be given up, till it is proved to be contrary to law; therefore it remains."

Burke followed.

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xvi. p. 717.

"He (Lord North) has told us that the people have been persuaded there are grievances, by writing, meeting, and speaking; but if it is a fault to persuade by writing, meeting, and speaking, let him tell us what means of persuasion more eligible he has discovered. Writing and meeting and speaking about grievances do not make them."[1] . . . And then he went on to defend and justify the action of those who had taken the lead in the agitation.

"If those who see oppression in its distant though certain approach, if those who see the subversion of liberty in its cause are always few, does it follow that there never are approaches to oppression, or remote causes of the subversion of liberty? If the few who can, and do discover effects in their causes open the eyes of others, if those who see the rights of election invaded in Middlesex, acquaint the graziers and clothiers of remote counties with their interest in the event and its consequences, are they for that reason leaders of a faction, actuated by personal and selfish motives?" . . .

And then he gave a description or rather drew up an indictment against the Ministers, every word of which was true, terrible though it now reads.

"Military executions have been wantonly exercised and wickedly countenanced; murders have been abetted, and murderers protected, encouraged, and rewarded; public money has been shamefully squandered; and no account given of millions that have been misapplied to the purposes of venality and corruption; obsolete and vexatious claims of the Crown have been revived, with a view to influence the elections of members to sit in the House; the majority of one branch of the Legislature have arrogantly assumed the power of the whole, and

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xvi. p. 721.

daringly superseded the law of the land by their resolutions; the humble petitions of the people to their gracious sovereign refused and discountenanced." The House divided on the proposed amendment — 138 voted for it, and 254 against it, or a majority for the Government of 116. "Thus ends the mighty bluster of petitions,"[1] wrote Walpole. Not quite yet though, even so far as this episode was concerned; only just beginning, so far as petitioning generally was concerned, and all that was now becoming associated with Petitions, namely, public meetings and Platformings.

The crucial debate over, the Government struck hard and sharp. The Lord Chancellor was dismissed, also the Marquis of Granby, the Commander of the Forces, and a host of smaller place-holders. "Every day produced some new ousting or resignation."[2]

By the 19th January 1770 "the Court had recovered from its consternation, and was taking measures of defence."[3]

Lord North, a few days later, expressed in plainer language than he had done before his view of the agitation and of the Platform orations, which were still evidently rankling deep.

"What evidence have we that there are public grievances which demand an inquiry? That a number of ignorant mechanics and rustics have been treated in one place with beer, and broke windows in another, is true; are these the grievances into which we are to inquire? That some persons whose share in the public interest should have taught better, have treated these rustics and mechanics, and taught them, in the jollity of their drunkenness, to cry out that they were undone,

[1] Horace Walpole's *Letters*, vol. v. p. 214, 10th January 1770.

[2] Weston MSS., *Parliamentary Papers*, 1885, vol. xliv.

[3] Walpole's *Letters*, vol. v. p. 217.

"is also true. Are these, then, the grievances into which we are to inquire? If these are not, I know of none. The nation is quiet and content, except where tumult and discontent are industriously excited; and shall the annual supply be withheld? shall every purpose of Government be suspended? shall the public creditors be unpaid, and the army and the navy want clothes and bread, because the drunken and the ignorant have been made dupes to the crafty and the factious, signed papers that they have never read, and determined questions that they do not know; roared against oppression and tyranny, with licentiousness that makes liberty blush, and staggered home with impunity, swearing they were in danger of slavery, while every one they met who did not join in their cry was in danger of a broken head?"[1]

In a fresh debate on the Middlesex election question,[2] the Court majority suddenly fell to 44, and the Duke of Grafton, the Prime Minister, resigned (on the 28th January 1770). "A violent panic prevailed, the whole administration seemed falling to pieces;" but the King promoted Lord North to be Prime Minister, the tide turned, and affairs began once more to brighten for the Court party. Walpole wrote on 2d February: "The very critical day is over, and the administration stands. . . . The people are perfectly quiet and seem to have delegated all their anger to their representatives—*a proof that their representatives had instructed their constituents to be angry.* . . . Yet I am far from thinking the administration solidly seated. When they could reduce a majority of 116 to 40 in three weeks, their hold seems to be very slippery."[3]

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xvi. p. 759.

[2] On the 25th January 1770.

[3] Walpole's *Letters*, vol. v. p. 225.

That the leaders of the popular party were not strong enough to cope with the concentrated power of the Court at this time was manifest at first sight. In the novel position in which they were placed, mistakes too on their side were to be expected. Want of success in the repeated divisions in the House of Commons quickly discouraged them. The Platform was no longer actively backing them, or where it attempted to do so, it was foiled. For instance, the Common Council of London, finding their petition ineffectual, held a meeting, which was attended by some 3000 persons,[1] and framed a "Remonstrance."

"To a Remonstrance they tell us," wrote Sedgwick, 6th February 1770, "an answer *must* be given. If not, force and arms are the only remedies. May heaven prevent the use of such remedies."[2] But the House of Commons by 284 votes to 157 passed a vote of very strong censure on the Remonstrance. That was all that came of it. Other meetings were in abeyance while the battle was being waged in Parliament, and there the battle was lost, and before the session of 1770 was brought to a close, the Government of Lord North might be considered as firmly established.

But though the Government had thus triumphed, and though the electors of Middlesex were for a time denied the right of choosing their own representative, the Platform was ultimately the victor. Immediate and complete success, though vigorously striven for, was more than could be expected. The battalions of subservient nominees or placemen in the House of Commons were, overwhelmingly numerous, and the Government was in too great majority to be vulnerably assailable. Nothing,

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xvi. p. 875.

[2] Weston MSS., *Parliamentary Papers*, 1885, vol. xliv. p. 421.

in fact, but the extreme importance of the subject in dispute could have brought the action of the Platform so near success at the time.

The view some people took of the contest is amusingly illustrated by Dr. Johnson, though it redounds little to his political sagacity. With contemptuous censure he thus described the point at issue: "The struggle in the reign of Anne was to exclude or restore an exiled king. We are now disputing with almost equal animosity whether Middlesex shall be represented or not by a criminal from a jail. The only comfort left in such degeneracy is that a lower state can be no longer possible."

But Burke put the matter in its true aspect when he said: "The people did not think of approaching the Throne with their grievances till the malversation of Ministers threatened immediate destruction to the State. Till the sacred right of election, wrested from their hands, filled the freeholders of Great Britain with universal apprehension for their liberties, they never disturbed the royal repose with their complaints. But oppression having now exceeded all bounds, the axe being at length laid at the very root of the subjects' independence, the people of England can be silent no longer."[1]

At the time, the Court, the Government, and the "King's friends" may have fancied that they had won a permanent victory. Their triumph, however, was short—the mere mirage of a triumph—for it was only during that Parliament that the Government was able to enforce the expulsion of Wilkes. To the next Parliament, which was elected in 1774, he was again returned as Member for Middlesex. Taught wisdom by experience, and unwilling to stir up a fresh outburst of

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xvi. p. 879.

Platform agitation, the King and the Government allowed him to take his seat in the new House of Commons without notice or opposition. Thus, in 1774, the Platform triumphed, and its first great victory, the prelude of many others, was won.

In reviewing this first resort to the Platform, as an engine of political warfare, certain facts which specially marked it should be recorded, so as to enable us hereafter to compare it with subsequent outbursts of Platform activity, and also the more readily to understand the different stages in the growth or evolution of the Platform. The first fact is that this agitation, greater than any which preceded it, had not the support of the bulk of what were then considered the more respectable classes of the community. Horace Walpole says:[1] "In fact the lower people alone, whom it was easy to lead, gave in to Petitions. The gentry in general discouraged, yet dared not openly oppose them, either fearing for their future elections or dreading the abuse that was cast on all who opposed the popular cry."

It is possibly true, as was stated, that the Petitions were signed by 65,000 of the electors. Having regard to the political ignorance and indifference prevailing at the time, and the state of dependence in which large masses of the people were kept, this was a very large number, but it is nevertheless true that many counties and towns did not join in the movement.

Another noteworthy fact is that the agitation was only in a small degree the spontaneous uninspired agitation of the people; and one more fact to be noted is that the agitation was taken, as it were, under the protection of the Whig party leaders, and the endeavour was made to give it a distinctive party aspect.

[1] *Memoirs of the Reign of George III.*, vol. ii. p. 393.

Lord Chatham, ex-Prime Minister, emerged from retirement and flung himself into the front of the battle. He even "engaged with new warmth in promoting petitions."[1] Lord Rockingham, another ex-Prime Minister, also, as we have seen, took an active part in directing the objects of the agitation. Sir George Savile and other leading men of the Whig party took energetic action.

Edmund Burke, though he did not actually speak at any meeting, gave his fullest strength to the popular cause—his wisest counsel. His general ideas on the subject may be gathered from a speech made by him in the House of Commons in 1771.

"I am not of the opinion of those gentlemen who are against disturbing the public repose. I like a clamour whenever there is an abuse. The fire-bell at midnight disturbs your sleep, but it keeps you from being burned in your bed. The hue and cry alarms the county, but it preserves all the property of the province. All these clamours aim at redress. But a clamour made merely for the purpose of rendering the people discontented with their situation, without an endeavour to give them a practical remedy, is indeed one of the worst acts of sedition."[2]

That the Middlesex agitation did not fall within the latter category is evident from what he further said: "Indeed, in the situation in which we stand, with an immense revenue, an enormous debt, mighty establishments, Government itself a great banker and a great merchant, I see no other way for the preservation of a decent attention to public interest in the representatives, but the interposition of the body of the people itself

[1] *Memoirs of the Reign of George III.*, vol. iii. p. 400.

[2] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xvii. p. 54.

whenever it shall appear, by some flagrant and notorious act, by some capital innovation, that these representatives are going to overleap the fences of the law, and to introduce an arbitrary power." "Standards for judging more systematically upon their conduct ought to be settled in the meetings of counties and corporations."

The interposition of the body of the people thus recommended, with their Platform and their resolutions, had, even so far as it had gone, proved most eminently disconcerting to the King and those in authority. Disconcerting it well might be, for the Platform was a new factor in the political life of the country, and carried with it vast potentialities for the future. Not alone was it a new form of expression of public opinion, but it was actually a new element or source of public opinion, differing quite from the Press, being more tangible, and carrying with it the greater weight which the personal presence of numbers gives to expressed opinion.

Henceforward statesmen would have to reckon with the fact that their policy and acts might be publicly discussed and criticised by the Platform in the presence of large gatherings of the people; henceforth they would have to submit to a new form of criticism and of interference in the domain of Government of the most galling and at times most offensive kind, alarming too in this, that it required apparently but one step to pass from criticism to dictation.

We can the more fully realise why the Court was in "consternation" over the Petitions, if we examine somewhat more closely the position and power of the Crown at this time, and inasmuch as throughout George III.'s reign the Crown was the consistent and unceasing foe of the Platform, the examination is the more necessary.

Briefly, the Crown had reached a position of unparalleled power in the Constitution. Formerly controlled by the House of Commons, it had succeeded in course of years in subverting the power of that House and ruling through it; and George III. was governed solely by one desire—that of perpetually increasing the influence and power of the Crown.

"The power of the Crown," wrote Burke in 1770, "almost dead and rotten as Prerogative, has grown up anew, with much more strength, and far less odium, under the name of Influence,—an influence which operated without noise and without violence; an influence which converted the very antagonist, into the instrument of power—which contained in itself a perpetual principle of growth and renovation, and which the distresses and prosperity of the country equally tended to augment, was an admirable substitute for a prerogative, that, being only the offspring of antiquated prejudices, had moulded in its original stamina irresistible principles of decay and dissolution."[1]

Erskine's opinion, though expressed in a later year (1797), may also with advantage be quoted. He said: "The Revolution of 1688 established the true principle of all political constitutions in maintaining the immutable right of the people to correct its Government; but, unfortunately, too little care was taken to guard against abuses in the Government so corrected. . . . The mild and seducing dominion of influence stole upon us, bestowing a greater and a more fatal authority than ever existed in the most arbitrary periods of the Government. The gradual creation of a mighty revenue, rising up amidst the glory and prosperity of the Empire, undermined in a few years that nicely-poised Constitution which un-

[1] See *Thoughts on the Cause of the Present Discontents.*

just power, though exerted for centuries, had only served to strengthen and confirm. The Crown, instead of being balanced and curbed in this House, has, during the greatest part of this century, erected its standard within these walls, and thrown the privileges of the people into the scale of the prerogative to govern the nation at pleasure without any control at all. So far, indeed, is the House of Commons from being a control upon the Crown, that it is the great engine of its power."[1] Authoritative opinions, such as these, carry almost conclusive weight with them; but if anything were wanted to sustain them, it would be found in the correspondence of the King with his Prime Minister, Lord North, where, time after time, and in the most important matters of Government and State policy, we find the Sovereign dictating specifically to his Ministers the course he desired to be taken, the Ministers passing on the order to their subservient followers or dependents in Parliament, and an obedient majority there readily doing as they were told. Why the majority submitted is explained by Burke in one of his speeches at this period: "I see very few on the side of the present Administration except those that are attached by golden hooks, and they indeed inquire nothing more concerning any question, but what are the commands of the day."[2]

The House of Commons had, as a matter of fact, ceased to be a control on the Crown for the people, and had become a control on the people, acting in opposition to their interests when those clashed with the interests of the Crown; and so many of its members found this so satisfactory and remunerative that the House was perfectly happy in its new position, perfectly willing to

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxiii. p. 654. [2] *Ibid.* vol. xvi. p. 762.

remain in it, vehemently opposed to the slightest change which threatened in any way to curtail its privileges or make it more dependent on, or more responsible to, the people. It was this feeling of hostility to popular co-operation which led to an event which had a vast indirect influence on the Platform, namely, the publication of the debates of Parliament.

The King and the House of Commons, whilst still in grips with Wilkes, came into conflict with the Press.[1] By a long and well-known order of the Commons, it was "highly criminal" in any printer to publish an account of the debates without the particular permission of the Speaker, and until this time such reports as were published in the newspapers were very limited in extent, and given in a very guarded style. But with the awakening of political life, and with the growing thirst for political information, greater freedom was gradually and tentatively exercised by the Press. The practice remained unnoticed by Parliament until, on one occasion, some speeches were published in such a manner as led to a complaint being made in the House of Commons on the subject. Then the whole subject came up for discussion, and a bitter struggle ensued between Parliament and the Press. It was quite in keeping with the autocratic ideas of the time, that efforts should be made to prevent the public knowing what passed in the House of Commons. The King, though "in the strongest manner recommending that every caution might be used to prevent the affair of the printers becoming serious," did the very thing himself to make it serious. He wrote to Lord North: "It is highly necessary that this strange and lawless method of publishing debates in the papers should be put a

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xvii. p. 58.

stop to; but is not the House of Lords, as a Court of Record, the best Court to bring such miscreants before? as it can fine, as well as imprison, and as the Lords have broader shoulders to support any odium that this salutary measure may occasion in the minds of the vulgar."[1]

Lord North endeavoured to give effect to the King's wishes as regards "putting a stop to the lawless method of publishing debates"; and vehement and prolonged debates took place on the subject in the House of Commons. The quarrel with the Press merged into a quarrel with the most powerful and popular Corporation then existing, the city of London, and war raged between it and Parliament on the subject. Printers were ordered to prison by the House of Commons, but the city magistrates bailed them out. The House of Commons messengers sent to arrest the printers were themselves arrested by the city officers. At last the House took the extreme step of committing the Lord Mayor of London and one alderman to the Tower, though it did not dare to touch Wilkes—who had been a co-sinner with them in defying the House, and in defeating its action—he being deemed too dangerous to meddle with. "He is to do what he pleases; we are to submit. So his Majesty ordered; he will have nothing more to do with 'that devil Wilkes.'"[2]

But here, when the battle had reached its most interesting phase, the efforts of the power of the House of Commons suddenly ended; further, apparently, Ministers were not able to go; and when Parliament was prorogued, and the session came to an end, the imprisonment of the Lord Mayor and the alderman also came to an end, and on their release they were

[1] *Correspondence between George III. and Lord North*, vol. i. p. 57.

[2] *Correspondence of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham*, vol. iv. p. 123.

received by the populace of London with a frenzy of acclamation and approbation. It was soon made evident, and, indeed, proved even to the House of Commons itself, that there was no power to check the Press; no means of preventing the publication of the debates. Editors, accordingly, from that time forward, began to give the debates at length, and though the practice was never actually recognised by Parliament, it has never been interrupted, nor any curtailment of the freedom of publishing the proceedings of Parliament attempted.

The resistance to the practice showed clearly how determined the King and Parliament were to stick to the power they possessed, and to exclude any participation therein by the people; and from their point of view it was quite natural they should resist it, for it would be difficult to overrate the effect which the publication of the debates in Parliament had on the political education of the people. It was practically their initiation into the affairs of State.

Their attention was directed to their political rights and interests; the freedom of speech which happily existed in Parliament was an incentive to them to maintain freedom of speech outside Parliament; the discussions in Parliament suggested discussions outside; and the arguments used by the Legislature afforded material for thought, and taught and enlightened the people. It gradually instructed them in the art of political discussion, and gave a turn to the national character in the direction of discussion which, happily for the peace of the kingdom, has been the most valuable preventive of violence and disorder. From this time, moreover, the connection between a member and his constituents entered on a new phase. The latter acquired the means of judging of the conduct and services

of their representatives with more accuracy than they were able to do before, and the representatives were forced to accord greater respect to the claims of their constituents by knowing that they were indirectly heard by them.

It appears, I think, clear from the foregoing statement of facts, and from the speeches and opinions which have been quoted, that the one predominating idea, in the minds of the King, of the Ministers, and of the vast majority of both Houses of Parliament, was that the government of the country should be carried on with as little regard as possible to any popular control or advice, that fight as they might among themselves for their respective shares of power and plunder, still that the province of government was theirs, belonged entirely to them. Over and over again do we see this guiding principle running clearly through all their actions; over and over again is it avowed by the King, by the Lords, and even by the Commons. At this period we find the King bursting forth: "Though I am not conscious of having much gall in my composition, I cannot help thinking that the uniform conduct of this disjointed opposition is a medley of absurdities which tends to nothing less than encouraging a contempt of the laws, and of that subordination that alone can preserve liberty, of which they pretend to be guardians."[1] And time after time this predominating idea breaks out in the debates in both Houses. All other ideas of policy or administration were subsidiary to it.

Hence the indignant astonishment in the Wilkes case, hence the bitter struggle to prevent the public being even so much as permitted to know what was

[1] *Correspondence between George III. and Lord North*, vol. i. p. 71.

spoken within the hallowed precincts of the temple of Government. Ingenious theories of the most far-reaching character in support of this idea were formulated and palmed off as fundamental indisputable truths. The most extreme and exaggerated construction was put on the idea of representative government. Members of Parliament claimed that, being representatives, they were completely independent; that in electing them, the electors divested themselves of all power for the life of the Parliament, and bestowed it on them, their representatives; and therefore that the electors had no right to interfere in any way in the affairs of Parliament, no matter what policy Parliament pursued, what measures it adopted. This theory comes with the most exquisite felicity and effrontery from Members of Parliament for rotten boroughs, who represented nobody except themselves, or their patron. One member, Mr. Welbore Ellis, thus enunciated this theory. He said:[1] "This House, in its legislative capacity, constitutes the only people of England which the law acknowledges. On the expiration of our term indeed, or our dissolution by the royal proclamation, our power reverts to the hands of our constituents, and the moment they elect new representatives, these representatives, and not the constituents, again become the legal body of the people. To imagine any other people, either in a judicial or an argumentative sense, is to lay the political axe immediately at the root of our Constitution. It is to substitute anarchy in the room of order. . . . As we are therefore the people of England, sir, nothing is more absurd than to say we are trampling upon the rights of the nation, when we are merely supporting our own constitutional claims, and exercising those powers which have been

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xvii. p. 125.

immemorially allowed us for the most salutary purposes."

Another speaker said: "The people of England, considered either as a legislative or a judicative body, have no existence but within the walls of this House. . . . The name House of Commons is misunderstood. Instead therefore of giving this assembly an ambiguous appellation I shall call it the people of England."

Other members for rotten boroughs joined in the chorus, and claimed that if they did not represent a numerous electorate they represented England. In every possible way this theory of government was sought to be maintained.

But now new forces were rising to combat it. The population of the country was growing, and the growing population were beginning to develop intellectual and political wants. The Press, which was increasing in strength and power, was readiest to hand, and was adopted; and now the Platform had been almost invented, and had been applied to politics with startling and most encouraging effect.

The Wilkes case had disclosed a triple alliance of King, Lords, and Commons, bound together by the common interests of ambition, power, place, and greed, in opposition to the rightful claims of the people. And it brought home to the popular party in the country the great fact, never after lost sight of, that the abuses of Government could only be removed, the grievances under which the people laboured could only be alleviated, and the Augean stable of corruption and despotism be alone cleansed, by bringing the House of Commons into unison with the feelings and interests of the people, and making it dependent upon the people themselves for its existence, its powers, and its privileges. Nor

were the people in want of leaders to point out these lessons to them. He who had been their favourite Minister, their idol for years, was once more giving them the lead.[1]

"I need not look abroad for grievances," said Lord Chatham; "the grand capital mischief is fixed at home. It corrupts the very foundation of our political existence, and preys on the vitals of the State. The Constitution has been grossly violated. . . . If the breach in the Constitution be effectually repaired, the people will of themselves return to a state of tranquillity. If not, may discord prevail for ever! . . .

"Rather than the nation should surrender their birthright to a despotic minister, I hope, my Lords, old as I am, I shall see the question brought to issue and fairly tried between the people and the Government. . . . I have been bred up in the principles of the English Constitution, and know that when the liberty of the subject is invaded, and all redress denied him, resistance is justified." And then, after inveighing against the corruption of the people themselves, as "the great original cause of their discontents, of the enterprise of the Crown, and the notorious decay of the internal vigour of the Constitution," . . . he passed on to the necessity of reforming the House of Commons.

"The Constitution intended that there should be a permanent relation between the constituent and the representative body of the people.[2] Will any man affirm that, as the House of Commons is now formed, that relation is in any degree preserved? My Lords, it is not preserved; it is destroyed. . . . The boroughs of this country have properly enough been called the rotten parts of the Constitution. But corrupt as they

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xvi. p. 747. [2] *Ibid.* p. 753.

are, they must be considered as the natural infirmity of the Constitution. The limb is mortified, but amputation might be death. Let us then endeavour to infuse such a portion of new health into the Constitution as may enable it to support its most inveterate diseases. . . .

"The representation of the counties is, I think, still preserved pure and uncorrupted. That of the great cities is on a footing equally respectable; and there are many of the larger trading towns which still preserve their independence. The infusion of health which I now allude to, would be to permit every county to elect one member more, in addition to the present representation. . . . It is not in the little dependent boroughs, it is in the great cities and counties that the strength and vigour of the Constitution resides, and by them alone, if an unhappy question should ever arise, will the Constitution be honestly and firmly defended."

And soon after, in replying to an address of thanks which was presented to him by the city of London for his Parliamentary conduct during the session, he again impressed the necessity of reform: "Purity of Parliament is the corner-stone of the commonwealth; and as one obvious means towards this necessary end, and to strengthen and extend the natural relation between the constituent and the elected, I have already expressed my earnest wishes for a more full and equal representation by the addition of one knight of the shire in the county as a further balance to the mercenary boroughs."

Sixty years and more were to pass before the reform of Parliament was carried; but from the time Lord Chatham delivered these opinions until the first great Reform Act was enrolled in the statutes of the realm, the reform of Parliament, or to speak more accurately,

such an extension and arrangement of the suffrage as would lead to the actual, instead of the nominal, representation of the people, was the object for which, above all others, the Platform strove.

In recording the first great genuine Platform agitation mention must also be made of practically the first attempt at organisation for political purposes.

Just at the very time that the Platform was forcing itself into prominence, and taking up its position as an engine of political power, the idea of political Associations or Societies, which were destined to be the principal source of strength to the Platform, was originated.

Those who were in opposition to the Government, and who were aspiring to obtain some influence in the conduct of the affairs of the country, felt the necessity of some form of organisation to enable them to make any head against the organised power of the Government. "This," says Mr. Stephens in his life of John Horne-Tooke, "was deemed a favourable conjuncture, therefore, to organise a new as well as formidable species of opposition, and, by means of political associations, to concentrate the hitherto unheeded resentments and influence of a number of scattered individuals into one formidable mass, which, without either the forms or restraints of a body politic, should produce all the spirit, zeal, and effect of a great corporation."[1] A multitude of associations of different kinds were created in London, denominated generally after the place they met in, such as "The Standard Tavern," or designated by the views of the leading members, like the "Anti-gallicans." These being generally more numerous than

[1] See *Memoirs of John Horne-Tooke*, by Alexander Stephens (London, 1813), vol. i. p. 161.

respectable, it was at length determined in 1769 to form one, which should have for its main object the preservation of the Constitution, as it had been established at the Revolution, and it assumed the name of "The Society for supporting the Bill of Rights." Wilkes, and four other Members of Parliament, and the Rev. Mr. Horne-Tooke, and others, were members. "The members were few at first, but respectable both for wealth and talents. Their meetings, their speeches, their resolutions, were attended with powerful effects. They inflamed the zeal of each other, they inspired the public mind with energy, vigour, and resentment." But like many societies they attempted more than they were able to accomplish, passing rapidly from possibilities to absurdities. They drew up instructions to be used as a test to all candidates before election to serve in Parliament, as if they had power to impose terms even on a single constituency. They quarrelled amongst themselves. Gradually the Society narrowed itself into a committee, and at last disappeared, having done its work in this, that it gave an example of organisation for a common end by individuals sharing similar opinions, and set a precedent for rendering the expression of those opinions more effectual.

That, after all the agitation, the Middlesex election case would exercise some influence at the General Election when it came, might have been expected, but the excitement of 1769 and 1770 had been followed by depression, and other more absorbing matters were throwing dark shadows across the political sky, and diverting attention from home politics. Moreover, the time for the dissolution was specially selected by the Government with the view of obviating any such result. The struggle with the American colonies had begun,

and the King dissolved Parliament somewhat prematurely, without waiting, as was then usual, for it to come to its natural end. "I advised the dissolution," said Lord North, "lest popular dissatisfaction, arising from untoward events, should break the chain of those public measures necessary to reduce the colonies to obedience."[1]

The General Election, or as Dr. Johnson called such an event, "the Saturnalian season, when the freemen of Great Britain may please themselves with the choice of their representatives," took place in 1774.

A grimly amusing letter in *The Gentleman's Magazine* of September of that year gives a description of some of the candidates. The writer said: "In the list of such who describe themselves 'proper persons' to be in the ensuing Parliament, I find 'nabobs' who have amassed immense fortunes by plunder, murder, and infidelity to their masters, and who now, by corrupting the electors, and destroying old family interests are become 'proper persons,' etc.: West Indians; noblemen's stewards, who (murder excepted) answer the above description of nabobs; commissaries who have already robbed the public of a little matter which now, as they give us to understand, enables them to live honest; stockjobbers and agents who, during the war, have, by the ruin of many, enriched themselves, and a few men in power, who let them into the secret very kindly and honestly; lawyers, like Swiss, who will fight for pay; Scotchmen, determined to make their fortunes by being 'proper persons' for English boroughs and Englishwomen; Irishmen, ditto, but greatly outdone by their competitors above mentioned; gamblers, for the credit of being in Parliament,

[1] *Correspondence between George III. and Lord North*, vol. i. p. 219.

and the means of getting into company, and preventing their being arrested for fraud and debt."

The elections were carried on with much warmth and excitement, though there were only 47 contests in England and Wales as against 58 in 1768; only 5 counties being contested as against 8 at the previous election. In one of the counties, however, namely in Sussex, an example was afforded of a constituency punishing one of their members by unseating him.

"The independent part of the county," says Oldfield,[1] "being at that time much dissatisfied with the conduct of the administration in attempting to procure the return of a candidate of their own nomination, contrary to the wishes of the people," unseated one member whose vote they did not approve, and returned another in his place. The contest lasted twenty-four days, and 3912 freeholders polled. The example is interesting as showing that, even at this time, the principle of responsibility on the part of a representative could be enforced by the electors in a very practical way. There was, however, but seldom such an opportunity of marking disapproval; seldom also the power. To increase these opportunities, and to secure the power was part of the work which lay before the Platform.

"Upon the whole," wrote Lord Stanhope, in his *History*, "we hear much less of venality at this general election than in the preceding one. In most of the populous places where the public feeling could be shown, it was shown clearly and beyond dispute on the side of the Ministers."[2] . . .

He goes on to give the explanation of this result: "The common sentiment was that the Government

[1] Oldfield's *Representative History*, vol. v. p. 3.

[2] *History of England*, by Lord Stanhope, vol. vi. p. 27.

"during the last few years had been justly provoked by the misconduct of Massachussetts, and the other New England provinces; that conciliation had been tried and had failed, that at all hazards the refractory and rebellious spirit of that country must be quelled. . . . The result of these elections therefore was not only to confirm, but to increase the general majority of Ministers."

The King expressed his gratification to Lord North: "I am much pleased," he wrote, "at the state of the supposed numbers in the new Parliament;"[1] and, indeed, he had good reason to be, for when Parliament met, the Opposition could muster only 13 votes in the Upper House, and 73 in the Lower. But though the Court candidates not only prevailed in the counties and small boroughs, and were triumphant in the city of Westminster, and though the Ministerial majority was actually increased, the new House of Commons, when it assembled, gave, as has been already stated, a tacit permission to Wilkes's re-election, by allowing him to take his seat without further opposition—and the first great victory of the Platform was won.

[1] *Correspondence between George III. and Lord North*, vol. i. p. 214.

CHAPTER III

THE ECONOMY AGITATION

TEN years were to elapse after the Middlesex election agitation before another outburst of Platform activity took place, but before proceeding to an account of that agitation, certain other interesting matters bearing on the Platform, and forming part of its history, claim attention.

The Platform, as familiar to us now, presents itself in several phases. At this early stage of its history it will suffice to draw attention to two—that in which it was used by the people for the expression of their feelings and their opinions, and which may be called its expressive function, and that in which it was used by political leaders as the means of instructing or communicating with the people, and which may be called its didactic function. And though these two different phases or functions often overlap and run into each other, still they are generally sufficiently distinct to be easily recognisable.

There is, at this stage of the subject, little to be said as regards the didactic phase. The Platform during the anti-cider tax agitation had been used for the purpose of expression. Again, during the Middlesex election agitation it had been mainly used for a similar

purpose. Never, up to this, at least so far as I have discovered, had the Platform been used for a didactic purpose, except, in a very humble sort of way, by a few of the rank and file of members of Parliament. Never, up to this, had a member of the Government come before a public political meeting to expound to the people his policy or to win their support for it. As Government was carried on in those days, there was no such thing as members of the Government expounding party issues, or explaining a policy to the electors even at election time. Even the leaders of the opposition did not do so. That all came much later; and as regards Platform speeches at elections, the members of the Government who were in the House of Commons having the choice of a very large number of rotten borough seats invariably selected places where the represented, if there were any at all, were few in number, and where they were content with other appeals than those of speech. A general election was the only occasion when the electors had any expectation of being addressed by their representatives, and the number of constituencies where this expectation existed was limited. Personal canvassing was more the custom than Platform addresses, and in many constituencies the electors had never heard, in some had never seen, their representatives. Speeches from their members in the long interval between the beginning and end of the septennial period were unknown. With the increasing culture and intelligence of the people, however, and the growing interest in the political affairs of the nation, greater importance became attached to the proceedings of Parliamentary elections, and to what was said thereat. But of how little consequence the Platform at elections was deemed, may be judged from the fact, that up to

the General Election of 1774, there is, with the exception of Alderman Beckford's speech already quoted, and some speeches made in the metropolitan constituencies, scarcely a single tolerably full report of an election speech, or even a summary of such a speech, to be found in the newspapers of the time. Doubtless, in some places, speeches were made, that is evident enough, but presumably they were not of sufficient importance or influence to be worth recording.

At the General Election of 1774, however, there was a most notable and memorable exception to this state of things, and we have what may be regarded as the first instance of a great orator and statesman using the Platform for the purpose of bringing himself into frank and unreserved communication with the people. Edmund Burke was the inaugurator of the change, and the occasion was his contest for the representation of Bristol. History hands us down a picture of the event. He had just been returned as member for Malton when he received the invitation to stand for Bristol. Obtaining the assent of his Malton friends he set off, and travelling two nights and days arrived, after a journey of over 300 miles, at Bristol. "He drove to the house of the mayor, but not finding him at home, proceeded to the Guildhall, where, ascending the Hustings and saluting the electors, sheriffs, and other candidates, he reposed for a few minutes, being utterly exhausted by fatigue and want of sleep; and then he addressed the citizens in a speech which met with great approbation."[1] He was successful in the contest, and on his being declared by the sheriffs duly elected as one of the representatives for that city, he made another speech which is memorable in the political literature of the country.

[1] Prior's *Life of Burke*, vol. i. p. 280.

One of the ways in which the Platform has worked the great change it has done in the Constitution of the country, has been by altering the relative position of the representatives and their constituents, that alteration being in the direction of increasing the control over the former by the latter. Upon the relationship of the representative to the represented, Burke spoke clearly and decisively, and as the matter frequently claims attention hereafter, his views are of the greatest interest, both as being the exposition of so distinguished a man, and as a categorical statement on the subject in the latter half of the last century, just when the Platform was beginning to come into prominence.

"It ought," he said,[1] "to be the happiness and glory of a representative to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. Their wishes ought to have great weight with him, their opinions high respect, their business unremitted attention. It is his duty to sacrifice his repose, his pleasures, his satisfactions, to theirs; and above all, ever, and in all cases, to prefer their interest to his own. But his unbiassed opinion, his mature judgment, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice to you, to any man, or to any set of men living. These he does not derive from your pleasure; no, nor from the law and the Constitution. They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.

"My worthy colleague says his will ought to be subservient to yours. If that be all, the thing is in-

[1] Burke's *Works*, "Speech at the Conclusion of the Poll," 1774, vol. iii. p. 236.

nocent. If Government were a matter of will upon any side, yours, without question, ought to be superior. But Government and legislation are matters of reason and judgment, and not of inclination; and what sort of reason is that in which the determination precedes the discussion; in which one set of men deliberate, and another decide, and where those who form the conclusion are perhaps 300 miles distant from those who hear the arguments?

"To deliver an opinion is the right of all men; that of constituents is a weighty and respectable opinion, which a representative ought always to rejoice to hear, and which he ought always most seriously to consider. But authoritative instructions, mandates issued, which the member is bound blindly and implicitly to obey, to vote, and to argue for, though contrary to the clearest conviction of his judgment and conscience,—these are things utterly unknown to the laws of this land, and which arise from a fundamental mistake of the whole order and tenor of our Constitution.

"Parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different and hostile interests, which interests each must maintain, as an agent and advocate, against other agents and advocates; but Parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole; where, not local purposes, not local prejudices, ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole. You choose a member indeed; but when you have chosen him, he is not member of Bristol, but he is a member of Parliament. If the local constituent should have an interest, or should form a hasty opinion, evidently opposite to the real good of the rest of the community, the member for that place ought to be as far, as any other, from any

"endeavour to give it effect. I beg pardon for saying so much on this subject. I have been unwillingly drawn into it, but I shall ever use a frankness of communication with you."

These speeches of Burke stand out conspicuously as the first examples of the frank unrestrained use of the election Platform by a really great orator and statesman, and they set to his contemporaries, and to posterity, an example which is a landmark in the history of the Platform, and which was bound in time to come to produce great results. But with this solitary exception, the Platform was little used for didactic purposes. Few men were in Burke's position for enlightening or instructing the people, others had neither the capacity nor the inclination to do so, whilst many looked upon the instruction of the multitude as the one thing to be most carefully and sedulously guarded against.

The didactic use of the Platform being so extremely limited at this period, it is around the other aspect that interest centres.

Having once proved its power and won a triumph as the mouthpiece of popular opinion, it was improbable that, with a growing restlessness among the people, and an increasing need to articulate their wants, the newly-discovered weapon would long lie idle. The records of Parliament show that a dropping fire of petitions was kept up. Numerous addresses, too, were constantly being prepared and presented to the King. We find him writing to Lord North on the 10th of September 1775: "It is impossible to draw up a more dutiful and affectionate address than the one from the town of Manchester, which really gives me pleasure, as it comes unsolicited. As you seem desirous that this spirit should be encouraged, I will certainly not object to it,

though by fatal experience I am aware that they will occasion counter-petitions."[1]

His "fatal experience" was once more verified; and while addresses in favour of coercing the American colonies poured in from all quarters, and were hailed with delight by the Ministers, petitions against such a course flowed in from Bristol, Glasgow, Liverpool, and other places,[2] and were consigned to what the opposition called the "Committee of oblivion."

These latter petitions were evidence that the country was by no means unanimously in favour of the war between England and her American colonies. Public feeling at the outset had approved and abetted it, but, after a time, gradually cooled off. Strangely enough, one effect of the war was to give an immense impetus to popular ideas in England.

Many of the greatest statesmen in the country had all along been strongly opposed to the war; and a large portion of the people shared their views. The cause of the quarrel was so flagrantly unjust, and large classes of the people in England had so much in common with the Americans—"violated privileges, infringed rights, petitions contemptuously rejected"—that they sympathised with those who were resisting an attempt to exercise unjust authority. But instead of following such violent methods as the Americans adopted for obtaining redress, they began to work in the more constitutional manner of meeting together, and discussing, and proposing plans for obtaining measures for the reform of abuses, and the removal of grievances.

Towards the end of 1779 the position of the country was so serious as to cause the deepest anxiety. In

[1] *Correspondence between George III. and Lord North*, vol. i. p. 267.

[2] See *The London Gazette*, 1775-76.

addition to the revolt in America, England was at war with France, and at war with Spain. Disaster had followed disaster; abroad, one half of the foreign acquisitions of the kingdom, one half of the colonies, were lost; at home, nearly one half of men's income went to support a calamitous war, or, what roused men's feelings to almost greater indignation, went to pay undeserved pensions, infamous sinecures, and unearned salaries to a worthless and contemptible crew of Court sycophants and Government tools and dependents. Taxes weighed heavily on all classes of the people; the high prices of the requisites of life crippled them still further. Circumstances, therefore, were all favourable for a vigorous popular movement, and it was not long before one began —the Platform again being called into requisition as the mouthpiece of the agitators.

This agitation, known afterwards as the Economy Agitation, was a most memorable one, more so than the Middlesex election agitation, and left a greater mark on the history of the country.[1]

On this occasion the movement had its beginning in the North Riding of Yorkshire, a county celebrated for the independence of its inhabitants. Here a few private gentlemen, totally free from party influence or connection, feeling only a heavy financial pressure on themselves, cast about for a remedy, and finding none, sought in the wider wisdom of their fellows help and guidance. And, accordingly, on the last day but one of the year,[2] the gentry, clergy, and freeholders of the county met in the Assembly Rooms at York.

The gathering was "such as perhaps never was assembled in the same manner in this nation." Those

[1] Wyvill's *Political Papers*, vol. i. p. 9. [2] 1779.

of "the first consideration and property in the county, if not in the kingdom," were present. "Never was there a more conspicuous display of genuine patriotism, never did the sacred fire kindled by English liberty burn with a purer flame than in that assembly."

The Reverend Mr. Wyvill opened the business in a speech of which the principal part was the proposal of a Petition to the House of Commons. That Petition summarised the evils which these Yorkshire gentlemen had met to protest against.[1]

It began by stating the following matters as facts :— "That the nation had for several years been engaged in a most expensive and unfortunate war; that many of our valuable colonies, having actually declared themselves independent, had formed a strict confederacy with our most dangerous and inveterate enemies; and that the consequence of these combined misfortunes had been a large addition to the national debt, a heavy accumulation of taxes, with a rapid decline of the trade, manufactures, and land-rents of the kingdom." The petitioners then declared that, "alarmed at the diminished resources, and growing burdens of this country, and convinced that rigid frugality had become indispensably necessary in every department of the State, they observed with grief that, notwithstanding the calamitous and impoverished condition of the nation, much public money had been improvidently squandered, that many individuals enjoyed sinecure places, efficient places with exorbitant emoluments, and pensions unmerited by public service, to a large and still increasing amount, whence the Crown had acquired a great and unconstitutional influence, which, if not checked, might soon prove fatal to the liberties of this country." They further declared,

[1] Wyvill's *Political Papers*, vol. i. p. 7.

that, conceiving the true end of every legitimate government to be, not the emolument of any individual, but the welfare of the community; and considering that, by the Constitution, the custody of the national purse was entrusted in a peculiar manner to the House of Commons, they begged leave to represent that until effectual measures were taken to redress these oppressive grievances, the grant of any additional sum of public money beyond the produce of the then existing taxes would be injurious to the rights and property of the people, and derogatory from the honour and dignity of Parliament. They, therefore, appealing to the justice of the Commons, most earnestly requested that, before any new burdens were laid upon the country, effectual measures might be taken by that House to inquire into and correct the gross abuses in the expenditure of public money, to reduce all exorbitant emoluments, to rescind and abolish all sinecure places and unmerited pensions, and to appropriate the produce to the necessities of the State.

The detailed account of the speeches affords a graphic picture of the "Platform" at this period.[1]

The first resolution that the Petition be adopted and sent having been proposed, Mr. Cholmeley, M.P., who was evidently not well disposed to the object of the meeting, rose and endeavoured to damp the ardour of those present. He declared that he had sat too long in the House to think that a Petition would be productive of any good effect; that as the Petition stated a misapplication of public money, Parliament would expect some proof of this. For his part, he only had it from common report. A Mr. Drummond seconded this opposition, and said that "the expenditure of public

[1] Wyvill's *Political Papers*, vol. i. p. 11.

money was subject to the constitutional control of Parliament; that if any men had misapplied it, that control should be made use of. Striking off pensions, etc., was plausible in theory, but difficult in practice. He desired to know who was to be the censor, who was to judge of the merit of pensioners, and to draw the line."

He got an answer from a Mr. Pritchard which must have sounded strange then, but which contained memorable words—"The people, the oppressed people, were to be the censors." A long speech was then made by a Mr. Smelt, who reprobated the Petition, and launched into a fulsome panegyric on the Crown, stating that "its power should be increased instead of diminished, that the King was not the servant of the people, but their soul, the life, the soul, the very existence of the Constitution." He said that one of the greatest misfortunes of this country was, that no Minister was found to keep up the taxes, on the return of peace, to the greatest height of a war establishment (here the whole meeting expressed the utmost disapprobation). An eyewitness of the meeting subsequently explained Mr. Smelt's opposition, stating that he was quite mad, "and some freeholders at the end of the room," says a newspaper report, "were highly incensed at the speech, and began to express their displeasure in a way which seemed to threaten some more serious marks of their resentment than mere words. Our correspondent informed them who Mr. Smelt was, and his present condition. In an instant the fury fled from their faces, every eye looked compassion, and every voice murmured condolence."

Mr. Turner succeeded Mr. Smelt, read a long list of pensions and exorbitant salaries, and declared that even

the proxies of the Lords, whom he called "the Upper House of Corruption," had their prices.

Mr. Hill rose next, and said that introducing the name of the King was indelicate to the meeting, as tending to intimidate them. The King, he doubted not, might be a patriot; it was the undue influence of his Ministers that excited indignation, and it was their misconduct that was universally felt. Other speeches followed.

Immediately after the discussion the Petition was read again and adopted, and a resolution come to to forward it to Parliament. And then followed another and a most important resolution: "That a Committee of sixty-one gentlemen be appointed to carry on the necessary correspondence for effectually promoting the object of the Petition, and to prepare a plan of an Association on legal and constitutional grounds to support that laudable reform, and such other measures as may conduce to restore the freedom of Parliament, to be presented to this meeting held by adjournment on the Tuesday in Easter week next ensuing."[1]

This was the first occasion when a regular scheme of Association was propounded as supplementary to the Platform, an organisation which was to be used as an instrument for giving cohesion and strength to the movement. The scheme was considerably in advance of the "Committee of Freeholders," which, ten years previously, the electors of Middlesex formed at the time of their quarrel with the House of Commons. It was on a far larger and more ambitious scale than those Societies which have been referred to in the last chapter. The proposers of the plan felt they had to justify it on account of its novelty, and one of them did so in

[1] See *Political Papers*, collected by the Reverend Christopher Wyvill, vol. i. p. 5.

the following speech: "Nothing was more common than association for important purposes, or for purposes of little moment. They had heard of associations for the detection of swindlers, and even of associations for the preservation of game, and may not a body of freeholders associate to give their joint votes to check corruption and to preserve the Constitution? That association is a measure of unquestionable legality appears from the spirit of our laws, from the express right to present Petitions to Parliament, which involves the right to join in any peaceful mode for the more effectual support of those Petitions."

Burke wrote shortly afterwards to Lord Rockingham, expressing his pleasure at the success of the meeting. "It was well; very well. The shade was of as much importance as the lights in your picture. Smelt was admirable, and his speech must have had a good effect in very many ways."[1]

The example thus set, other counties quickly followed. The case of the Yorkshire petitioners was so moderately and conclusively stated as to command a very general concurrence. Only a few days after the York meeting another county gave expression by the Platform to its feelings. The county of Hants held a meeting at Winchester—"The most numerous and respectable known in that county for many years." After numerous speeches, a petition to Parliament on the plan of the York petition was "highly approved by all present," and unanimously agreed to.

But a far more important meeting took place a few days later. On 7th January (1780) "A numerous and most respectable assembly of the nobility, gentry, clergy, and freeholders of the county of Middlesex" met in the

[1] See Burke's *Works*, vol. i. p. 414.

Assembly Rooms at Hackney. Many persons of consequence were present, the Duke of Portland and three or four peers among the number. "There has not been a meeting for many years at which so numerous a body of opulent freeholders were present."

A petition exactly similar to that of Yorkshire was adopted, after several speeches had been made, one speaker asserting that, all taxes considered, they paid 5s. in the £1. But the meeting did not stop with the adoption of the Petition, and Middlesex may claim the honour of originating a system of organisation in support of the Platform far beyond anything hitherto attempted.

A Mr. Baker proposed the establishment of a committee to correspond with the Association of other counties, and open an immediate correspondence with the county of York. This was going a long way in advance of Yorkshire. There is no sufficiently definite expression either in the Resolution or speeches at the York meeting that more was intended by the proposed Association there than the association of individuals for the particular purpose.[1] What Middlesex proposed was the association of separate bodies—quite another matter, and altogether without precedent.

This was a completely new feature in English political life, making this agitation memorable in our history—the formation of a powerful Association to back up Platform agitation—and, inasmuch as organisation has ever been the most powerful aid to the Platform, the event is of particular interest in the history of the Platform. The rapidity with which county followed county in their adoption of the requests of the York-

[1] This is, I think, made quite clear by the answer of the Chairman of the Yorkshire Sub-Committee to Charles T. Fox, Chairman of the Westminster Committee (see Wyvill's *Papers*, vol. i. p. 93).

shire petitioners, and their recourse to the Platform for consultation and for the public expression of their views, was truly astonishing. In Sussex the Duke of Richmond and several of the nobility, and gentry, and freeholders, applied to the High Sheriff to call a meeting, "conceiving it to be highly proper in times of national distress that the people at large should have an opportunity of examining their situation, and of concerting measures for the public good." The High Sheriff refused to do so, saying he did not think the requisition numerously enough signed. The Duke, however, summoned a meeting himself, and it was held, and a Petition, the same as that of Yorkshire, was adopted. The High Sheriff of Essex likewise refused to call a meeting; nevertheless one was held, and a Petition adopted.

The country, despite High Sheriffs, seemed to be determined on the expediency of pursuing the example set by Yorkshire. On the 18th of January "a very respectable meeting of freeholders of the county of Hertford met at the Shire House at Hertford, where, after many speeches had been made, and much discussion, resolutions were carried the same as those of York and Middlesex. On the 21st January "a large and respectable meeting of the nobility, etc., of Surrey was held at Epsom," five lords and many baronets being present—a fact sufficient to prevent a repetition of the taunt of the boroughmongering fraternity in the House of Commons that men of property and gentlemen were not taking part in the movement, and that it was only the base-born and those unfit to enter the gates of the King's palace who were giving the trouble. A Petition was agreed to unanimously.

Dorset and Cumberland also joined in the agitation.

The economists, for so the principal workers in this agitation can best be described, received one check at a county meeting, and the account of the occurrence is interesting as showing the toleration there was at this period in public meetings for the statement of opposite opinions, and how largely the proceedings at a meeting sometimes assumed the form of a discussion or debate. This check was given them at Huntingdon, where, on the 20th January, a very numerous meeting was held to consider a Petition on the same lines as the Petition of Yorkshire.

After much debate and difference of opinion, the Duke of Manchester and Lord Fitzwilliam, speaking in favour of the Petition, and Lord Sandwich and Lord Hinchingbrooke and others against it, the Sheriff put the question, and declared that the majority of the hands were against the Petition, upon which it was proposed to divide and tellers were appointed; but the supporters of the Petition refusing to divide, "a general confusion ensued," and the numbers could not be declared.

A few days after this, two meetings were held. One was at Wells, where the Petition was adopted. Mr. Canon Wilson opposed it, but "bewildering himself in logical distinctions," and, being totally unsupported, he "suddenly concluded." As a set-off against this calamity, it appears that a Mr. Luders made a speech, to which, said the newspaper reporter, "it is impossible to do ample justice; it was eloquent and correct; he spoke with great powers of oratory and reason."

The other meeting was at Gloucester, where, in spite of the fact that the Sheriff had refused to convene a meeting, a numerous and respectable meeting was held at the Boot Hall, a good deal of speaking took place, and a Petition was agreed to.

One more meeting must be mentioned, that of the nobility, gentry, and freeholders of the county of Wilts, which was held on the 28th of January 1780, not that it was by any means the last of the meetings of the agitation, but because it is specially memorable on account of the fact that it was absolutely the first public political meeting, not connected with an election, at which leading politicians, who had held high office, and who, very shortly afterwards, were to be the principal men in the government of the country, made use of the Platform. The two men who thus for the first time used the Platform were the Earl of Shelburne, who had been Secretary of State in the Duke of Grafton's Administration from 1766 to 1768, and Charles James Fox, who had been a Lord of the Admiralty from 1770 to 1772, and a Lord of the Treasury from 1772 to 1774.

Lord Shelburne's speech is shortly reported (about twenty lines), the most noticeable sentences in it being, "He heartily wished every man present would stand forth and disclose his opinion without diffidence or reserve . . . . that this country was not to be saved by men who had a knack of tacking a few sentences together, but by the people at large." Fox's speech is a real specimen of a genuine Platform speech, and is reported at considerable length.

He said: "Though much used to public speaking, he had never addressed such an assembly as that then present, for he had never before spoken to an uncorrupt assembly" (a compliment to the House of Commons). He then proceeded to show the great advantages which the people might gain by insisting firmly on their rights, and on the redress of their grievances; and earnestly exhorted them to consider their own weight and conse-

quence in the State; and he repeatedly asserted that it would not be in the power of the best or ablest Minister to make them great and happy, unless they had the spirit and will to become so. An honourable Gentleman had mentioned "the magnanimity of Parliament in relieving Ireland? What was it made Parliament magnanimous in relieving Ireland? It was the magnanimity of the people of Ireland, who were resolved to be relieved. What was it made Parliament magnanimous towards America? It was the vigorous and successful opposition made by the people of America to their power. From the vigorous exertion of the people of England to rid themselves of their grievances the same success might be expected. He conjured them to depend chiefly upon themselves for a redress of their grievances, and not to sit still in expectation of it from any statesman, how great soever might be their abilities, or how patriotic soever their intentions." . . . He concluded by exhorting constituents diligently to watch the conduct of their representatives, and carefully to inquire into the motives of it—in fine, to consider themselves as the guardians of their own rights, and to entertain a rational distrust of all men in public stations.[1]

Only one month of agitation was over—only for one month had the Platform been telling of the grievances of the people, and already did the meetings awaken searchings of spirit and fears among the Ministers and their dependents. Already were charges of faction and false patriotism hurled against the meetings and their promoters.

"With the plausible pretence of establishing economy, and checking corruption, and venality," wrote

[1] See *The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 1st February 1780.

a contemporary newspaper,[1] "their scheme is to combine and associate the people in all parts of the kingdom, and to form committees of correspondence, that by their joint force and opposition to the Government they may effect a change of Administration, or raise a confederacy which shall dictate to the Legislature and exercise supreme power in the State."

In this agitation, so far, the country had been the most active. London, however, at last joined. "The spirit of the freeholders of York seems to pervade the whole country," wrote a London newspaper,[2] "and at length has begun to show itself in the metropolis."

On the 2d February a meeting was held in Westminster Hall. About 3000 persons met, headed by the Duke of Portland, the Cavendishes, Wilkes, Burke, Townshend, Lord Temple.[3] Charles Fox was placed in the chair; Sawbridge moved the Petition, and was seconded by Wilkes, who, "in one of the best speeches he ever made," expressed his happiness at that "spirit of association which at this period pervaded the kingdom." A Petition similar to that of York was voted, and a committee of lords and others chosen. Charles Fox then made "a fine and warm speech,"[4] and was particularly severe on Lord North, and Dr. Jebb proposed Mr. Fox for the future candidate for Westminster, which was received with universal applause. London city followed suit with a meeting a few days after.

It is clear from these accounts that in this agitation, in which the Platform took so conspicuous a part, a large portion of the upper and middle classes participated. The names of those who are reported as attending the meetings as well as of the speakers show this conclu-

[1] *The Morning Chronicle*, 27th January 1780.

[2] *Ibid.* 31st January 1780.

[3] *Ibid.* 3d February 1780.

[4] *Last Journals of Horace Walpole*, vol. ii. p. 364.

sively, and this circumstance is one of those which distinguishes this agitation from that in connection with the Middlesex election. It also marks strongly the fact that whilst many were disposed to discountenance the Platform when used by those they did not approve of, yet they themselves were willing to use it when it suited their own purposes to do so. In this case the object was one which enabled those participating in it to sink their political differences, as all who did not profit by Government extravagance might combine for economy in the administration of State affairs.

Summing up the number of meetings which had been held, and having regard to the position and character of the people who had attended them, it is apparent that by means of the Platform a very considerable agitation against the Government had been created in the country, and the new feature of association rendered the agitation more formidable than any which had previously taken place.

To repeat the test already laid down for gauging the power of the Platform, we must examine how far it had, on this occasion, an effect on Parliament and on the Government.

The effect was considerable—greater by far than had been the case in the Middlesex election agitation.

"The Court has been thunderstruck with what has already been done," wrote Horace Walpole, on the 2d February; and a few days later he varied it somewhat by saying, "At first the Court was struck dumb." Then looking forward to the future with interest he added:[1] "Detached scenes there have been, in different provinces; they will be collected soon into a drama in St. Stephen's Chapel."[2]

[1] Walpole's *Letters*, vol. vii. p. 325. [2] *Ibid.* p. 328.

The first scene of the drama took place in the House of Commons on the 8th February 1780,[1] when the Petition from the county of York was presented by Sir G. Savile, he who exactly ten years previously had boldly told the House that they had "betrayed the rights of their constituents." History relates that the importance of the subject, the novelty of the occasion, and, perhaps, still more the character of that eminent and revered patriot, produced so profound an attention, that deep silence and stillness reigned in every part of the House.

Well might Ministerial members of the House be silent and listen with bated breath. Half England had risen in public and formal judgment on them and their misdeeds, and now not merely the accuser but the reprover had come, cataloguing their iniquities with unfaltering hand; and holding up their enormities before their eyes and the eyes of the world. It was the first clear and unmistakable monition to the whole crew of "King's friends," boroughmongers, placemen, and the corrupt hangers-on of the Government, as well as to the Government itself, that they must amend their ways, that England and England's people were not theirs to do what they liked with, as they seemed to think they were.

"He brought a Petition," said Sir G. Savile, "which had swallowed up the consideration of all private objects, and superseded all private petitions—a Petition subscribed by 8000 freeholders and upwards.

"The people had heard that a regard to private interest in the House was a great enemy to the discharge of public duty. They feel severely the pressure of heavy taxes, and yet are at the same time told that

[1] See *Parliamentary History*, 1780, vol. xx. p. 1370.

"the money which they can ill spare is wasted profusely, not only without its producing any good, but that it is applied to the production of many bad effects. They beg that inquiry may be made into the expenditure of that money; that if there are any exorbitant salaries they may be reduced; that if there are any useless places or unmerited pensions they may be abolished. These things, he said, were represented calmly and with moderation. . . . Never, surely, were petitioners to Parliament, upon any great public grievance, more cool and dispassionate. They confine themselves to one object—the expenditure of public money. But though they made no strictures on the past management of Ministers, he could not but in candour acknowledge that it was pretty plainly hinted or implied, that those who had hitherto managed our public affairs should manage them no more. . . . He made no threats; the Petition was not presented by men with swords and muskets. It was a legal, a constitutional Petition. The request of the petitioners was so just and reasonable that they could not but expect it would be granted; but should it be refused, there he would leave a blank—that blank let the consciences, let the feelings, let the reason of Ministers supply. Partial expedients, palliations, excuses, mock inquiries, would not be sufficient. The universality of the sentiments on this subject, he said, was no contemptible proof of their justness. He wished that House to consider, from whom that Petition came. It was first moved in a meeting of six hundred gentlemen and upwards; in the hall where that Petition was conceived, there was more property than within the walls of that House."[1] He then threw down with a good deal of vehemence upon the table a

[1] *Parliamentary History*, 1780, vol. xx. p. 1376.

list of the gentlemen's names, and continued: "But they are not to abandon their Petition, whatever may may be its fate in this House; there is a committee appointed to correspond on the subject of the Petition with the committees of other counties," and he concluded by likewise throwing on the table a list of the names of the committee.

Well can we understand that "the Minister seemed to show some vexation and resentment in his answer."[1]

Fox backed up the Petition. "He could not imagine," he said, "that any objection could possibly be made to the Petition. But some might perhaps say, Are we sinners above all that went before us? like those on whom the Tower of Siloam fell? Are we more corrupt than other Parliaments who were never pestered with petitions of this kind? No," said he, "I do not suppose you are; but though former Parliaments were as bad as you, and you know the severity of that comparison, yet the people did not know it. Now they do not perhaps see it, but they feel it; they feel the pressure of taxes, and they beg you would not lay your hand so heavily upon them, but be as economical as possible in the expenditure of their money. Let the Ministers grant the request of the people, and the whole glory of so popular a compliance will be entirely theirs. Like charity, it will cover the multitude of their past sins."[2]

The other Petitions followed the presentation of this leading Petition very fast.

No less than twenty-six counties in England, and three in Wales, and several considerable cities, had adopted petitions and passed resolutions, and as one

[1] *Annual Register*, 1780, p. 90.

[2] *Parliamentary History*, 1780, vol. xx. p. 1378.

petition after another was presented, even so corrupt, so self-assertive an assembly as the then House of Commons, must have felt that they were face to face with a display of popular opinion such as they had never before witnessed.

Before any direct Parliamentary action was taken on these petitions, the effect of the agitation reached the House of Commons in another shape, that of a plan by Edmund Burke, who, stimulated by the meetings, Platformings, and petitionings, propounded a most elaborate measure for the better security of the independence of Parliament, and the economical reform of the civil and other establishments.

What he had bent the whole force of his mind to, he said, was "the reduction of that corrupt influence, which is itself the perennial spring of all prodigality, and of all disorder, which loads us more than millions of debt, which takes away vigour from our arms, wisdom from our councils, and every shadow of authority and credit from the most venerable parts of our Constitution."[1]

That corrupt influence was principally maintained by the existence of a large number of valuable offices which were sufficient to corrupt Parliament with.

To take away from the Crown such a powerful instrument for evil, he proposed the abolition of nearly fifty of these unnecessary offices which were held by Members of Parliament, and thereby also to effect an economy of some £200,000 a year.

He concluded his speech with a magnificent burst of prophetic oratory: "Let the Commons in Parliament assembled be one and the same thing with the commons at large. The distinctions that are made to so separate us are unnatural and wicked contrivances. Let us

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxi. p. 1.

identify, let us incorporate ourselves with the people. Let us cut all the cables and snap all the chains which tie us to an unfaithful shore, and enter the friendly harbour that shoots far out into the main its moles and jetties to receive us. 'War with the world, and peace with our constituents.' Be this our motto and our principle; then, indeed, we shall be truly great. Respecting ourselves, we shall be respected by the world. At present all is troubled, and cloudy, and distracted, and full of anger and turbulence, both abroad and at home; but the air may be cleared by this storm, and light and fertility may follow it. Let us give a faithful pledge to the people, that we honour indeed the Crown, but that we belong to them; that we are their auxiliaries and not their taskmasters; their fellow-labourers in the same vineyard, not lording over their rights, but helpers of their joy; that to tax them is a grievance to ourselves; but to cut off from our enjoyments to forward theirs, is the highest gratification we are capable of receiving."[1]

Such was the alarm caused in the Commons by the agitation out of doors that the principal of the Bills which he introduced got as far as the Committee stage in the House of Commons; there, however, it perished.

Some time elapsed before the House would give its consideration to the Petitions, and the leaders of the agitation made good use of it.

Several of the Chairmen of the Committees, who had met together in London, issued on the 28th of February a circular to the several Committees throughout the kingdom requesting each of them to depute one, two, or three members to meet in London to confer together upon the most effectual mode of supporting

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxi. p. 71.

the objects of their petitions and some other important matters. An explanatory letter from Wyvill accompanied it: "Each county, city, and town having first associated, separately and apart, the whole body of petitioners in due time may be collected and firmly consolidated in one great 'National Association'; the obvious consequence of which must be certain and complete success to the constitutional reform proposed by the people."[1]

Several of the counties responded to the invitation, and sent deputies to London. Among these delegates was Sheridan, and years afterwards, when the mere mention of the word "Convention" was like flaring a red rag in the face of a bull, we have a description from him of the meetings of these delegates and of their object. He said[2] that "in collecting public opinion so as to make it operate on the House of Commons, it was never intended that it should operate by anything like violence, or force, or rebellion, but that they certainly did expect to create a degree of awe in the House of Commons of them and their proceedings; not a wrong or improper awe, but the sort of awe and respect which they conceived the House of Commons was bound to pay, and must pay, to the just sentiments of the people at large, when collected and expressed. It was their purpose and hope to go on progressively from small to greater numbers, and from thence to greater, until Parliament was surrounded with the voice of the people."

During March these delegates had frequent meetings, doing their best to secure Parliamentary support for the prayer of the Petitions. The existence of such

[1] Wyvill's *Political Papers*, vol. i. p. 114.

[2] See *State Trials*, vol. xxv. p. 388.

a body—a sort of convention, in fact—was a totally new feature in English politics, and excited some objections among even those who were anxious for the success of the Petitions. "Associations and committees had produced such recent effects in America, and even in Ireland, that the very terms were become suspicious."

Now, however, they were imported into English political life, and the fact marks a considerable advance on any previous agitation.

At last the eventful day[1] came which had been fixed by the House of Commons for taking the Petitions into consideration.[2]

As a preliminary to the great debate of the evening, Charles Fox "harangued the petitioners of Westminster in the hall in the morning, and was exceedingly severe on the King and the present reign; and declared loudly for annual Parliaments, and the additional hundred knights, which were eagerly adopted by the assembly." "The Court had expected that Fox would be attended to the House by a great mob, and the Guards were ordered to be in readiness; but he went privately, as usual, and there was not the least tumult."[3]

In a very full House Mr. Dunning rose.[4] "The Opposition had kept secret their intended motions," wrote Horace Walpole. "The very first made by Mr. Dunning was a thundering one. The words were, 'That the influence of the Crown has increased, is increasing, and ought to be diminished.' The walls could not believe their own ears; they had not heard such language since they had a wainscot."[5]

Scarcely could they have believed their own senses

[1] The 6th April 1780.

[2] The Petitions were signed, it was said, by 100,000 electors.—*Parliamentary History*, vol. xxi. p. 345.

[3] Walpole's *Journals*, vol. ii. p. 391.

[4] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxi. p. 342.

[5] Walpole's *Letters*, vol. vii. p. 348.

when the motion was carried by a majority of 18—233 voting for it, and 215 against—and immediately on the top of this resolution another was passed, "That it is the opinion of this Committee that it is the duty of this House to provide, as far as may be, an immediate and effectual redress of the abuses complained of in the Petitions presented to this House from the different counties, cities, and towns in this kingdom."

Here, indeed, was a tremendous triumph for the Platform,—a successful division in the House on a matter which had originated out of the House, which had been fostered into power by the force of the Platform and public meetings, and against which the whole influence of the Court and its hangers-on had been directed.

"It was one of the curiosities of the present age to see a Minister in the minority," observed a member just after the defeat of the Government.

"The exultation and triumph on one side of the House was only equalled by the evident depression and dismay which prevailed on the side of Administration. . . . The system of the Court was shaken to its foundations. Without doors, the joy and triumph in most parts of England, as well in most of the counties that did not petition as in those that did, was great and general." [1]

But with this brilliant success the high-water mark was reached.

As Dunning proceeded, a few days later, to give effect to the decisions of the House, in the next decisive division the majority against Ministers sunk to two. A little later, 24th April, Ministers secured a substantial majority of 51 (254—203) in another important divi-

[1] *Annual Register*, 1780, p. 172.

sion, and the danger for the Government was past. It seems at first sight difficult to account for this sudden fiasco on the part of the petitioners, but Horace Walpole gives a clear explanation of the reason of the final triumph of the Ministers. It is one which repeated itself time after time on later occasions. Overweening conceit seems, in fact, to be an almost necessary element in popular associations. Some fortnight or so before the fateful 6th of April there is an entry in his Journals (16th-17th March):—

"The Committees of Association began to give great alarm. They voted themselves a right of considering and deciding on questions pending in Parliament, and of censuring or approving the part taken by particular members. But they were going much farther still, and were for engrafting on Petitions two resolutions of the highest moment,—one, that there ought to be a more equal, consequently a new, mode of representation; the other, that there should be frequent Parliaments, at first triennial. . . . In the first place, it will be very unfair to engraft new matter on the Petitions.

"They who voted for a Petition for economy may not approve of a new mode of representation, nor of more frequent Parliaments.

"Next, it is unwise to add new matter. It was the necessity of economy, which every man felt, that produced so great a change against the Court and so much unanimity. The two others are very problematic questions, and will sow difference of opinion and dissension, instead of compacting unanimity, and drawing in the rest of the nation."[1]

On the 21st of March he wrote: "The Associations were very ready to affect Parliamentary airs,

[1] *Journal of the Reign of King George III.*, by Horace Walpole, vol. ii. p. 378.

"and accordingly assumed cognisance of matters actually pending in Parliament. This has offended moderate men, and many who approved the Petitions were alarmed at the Associations, with good reason, for the deputation, composed of three members of each Committee, which is assembled in London, are going to take large strides indeed, and intend to propose to their several counties to demand annual Parliaments, and to alter the mode of representation."[1] Some of the Whigs "strenuously resist these innovations."

The next day he wrote: "I wish I knew what would repair an extravagance that I have seen to-day—Mr. Wyvill's manifesto. I never saw such a composition of obscurity, bombast, and futility. . . . We shall lose all the benefit of the present spirit by the whimsies of men that have not common sense, nor can express even what they mean."[2] Several counties promptly withdrew from connection with the Central Committee of Association,[3] and in May we find Walpole writing to his friend, Mr. Mason, in Yorkshire: "The spirit you *raised* (in Yorkshire) is evaporated or split into a thousand branches by mismanagement."

Though the triumph of the Platform was thus short-lived, and the collapse so sudden, still it was far from being without permanent effect. "The national spirit had shown the Court that the Lion was dormant, but not toothless," and the necessity of increased moderation and more careful management in the conduct of State affairs was inculcated on those in authority.

[1] Horace Walpole's *Letters*, vol. vii. p. 341.

[2] *Ibid.* p. 343.

[3] At the second meeting of the county of York on the 28th March 1780, the object proposed was to form an Association for effecting a reform of Parliament. But the peers who had approved the economic Petition of the first meeting were not prepared to accede to the intended measure of the second. — Wyvill's *Political Papers*, vol. i. p. xiv.

But the agitation had a wider result than this. The Platform had been again tried as the mouthpiece of popular opinion outside Parliament, and had again proved itself of the utmost service; and the engrafting on it of a system of organisation had enhanced its power, giving it a cohesion and unity of direction which added immensely to its strength.

Nor were the results of the work of the Platform in this agitation confined to the agreement in favour of the Petitions. The speeches which had been made at the numerous meetings, and which were pretty fully reported in the newspapers, spread far and wide throughout the country a fuller knowledge of political principles. They established on a far stronger and broader basis than ever before the right of publicly discussing and criticising the measures and conduct of the Government; and both those who participated in the meetings, and those who heard or read the reports of the speeches, having been roused from comparative inanition to a proper sense of their status and rights in the Constitution of the country, and having once tasted the pleasures of political excitement, were never likely to sink back into a state of lethargic longsuffering or fatalistic indifference.

Scarcely had the excitement of this struggle somewhat subsided when a most exciting and impressive event occurred, the discredit of which was at once laid to the charge of the Platform, and which was fastened on as exhibiting the danger of public speech and public meeting.

Hume, in his Essay on the Liberty of the Press, incidentally refers to the danger:[1] "We need not dread from this liberty (of the Press) such ill consequences as

[1] Hume's *Essays*, fourth edition, p. 11.

"followed from the harangues of the popular demagogues of Athens and tribunes of Rome. A man reads a book or pamphlet alone, and coolly. There is none present from whom he can catch the passion by contagion. He is not hurried away by the force and energy of action. And should he be wrought up to never so seditious a humour, there is no violent resolution presented to him by which he can immediately vent his passion. The liberty of the Press, therefore, however abused, can scarcely ever excite popular tumults or rebellion."

The liberty of the Platform, or free verbal discussion and deliberation, was as yet only associated, in even thoughtful minds, with the violent harangues of Athenian demagogues and Roman tribunes; and that popular tumults and violence must ensue from public meetings, and public speeches, was, as we shall find, the uniform view of the Platform held by a succession of even great statesmen. Even the right of "petitioning" was regarded with suspicion and ill-concealed jealousy and dislike, as tending dangerously towards government by the populace.

In May 1778 an Act of Parliament had been passed repealing an Act of William III.'s reign which imposed certain disabilities on Roman Catholics in England. In the following winter the Scotch, believing the Act was about to be extended to Scotland, formed several local associations to resist concession to the Roman Catholics there.

These associations did everything in their power to inflame the zeal and arouse the bigotry of the people; but as the Platform was unknown in Scotland at the time, the work was done by pamphlets and hand-bills, and by the pulpit.

In the following year serious anti-Catholic riots took

place in Glasgow and in Edinburgh. Houses and chapels were burnt down and destroyed, and Catholics, and even Protestant sympathisers with them, had to fly for their lives, the local authorities almost conniving at these proceedings. Soon afterwards a Protestant Association was formed in England to obtain the repeal of the objectionable Act, and to foster a belief that the concessions made to the Roman Catholics would be attended with immediate danger to the State, and to the Protestant religion.

In November 1779 Lord George Gordon, at that time a member of the House of Commons, was elected President of the Association, and several public meetings were held in London—1800 persons being present at one of them,—at which speeches were made, tending to raise a spirit of intolerance and fanaticism in the minds of the hearers.

By May "this mad lord," as Horace Walpole very truly calls him, determined on more energetic action; and on Monday, 29th May, a meeting was held at Coachmaker's Hall, pursuant to public advertisement, in order to consider the mode of presenting a Petition to the House of Commons on the subject of the Act. Lord George Gordon took the chair, and delivered a long and most inflammatory harangue.[1] He endeavoured to persuade his hearers of the rapid and alarming progress that popery was making in this kingdom; and he proceeded to observe that the only way to stop it was going in a firm, manly, and resolute manner to the House and showing their representatives that they were determined to preserve their religious freedom with their lives; that, for his part, he would run all hazards with the people; and if the people were too lukewarm

[1] See *Annual Register*, 1780, p. 190, *et seq.*

to run all hazards with him when their conscience and their country called them forth, they might get another president; for he would tell them candidly, that he was not a lukewarm man himself, and that if they meant to spend their time in mock debate and idle opposition they might get another leader. He then proposed that the whole body of the Protestant Association should attend in St. George's Fields on the next Friday, to accompany him to the House of Commons on the delivery of the Protestant Petition. He further informed them that if less than 20,000 of his fellow-citizens attended him on that day he would not present their Petition; and for the better observance of order, he said, they should arrange themselves in four divisions; and that they might know their friends from their enemies, he added that every real Protestant and friend of the Petition should come with blue cockades in their hats.

On the Friday following, accordingly, a large multitude gathered at St. George's Fields—some 30,000 to 40,000 persons at the very lowest computation. Thence they proceeded to the Houses of Parliament with the Petition, which had been signed, it was said, by some 120,000 people. With no one to offer them the slightest resistance, or no force of any sort to keep even a vestige of order—for the Ministers had made no preparations whatever against disorder,—they forced their way into the passages and lobby of the Houses of Parliament, and becoming excited and violent, assaulted several members of both Houses, and generally intimidated the Parliament. With much difficulty, and not without grave risk, was this crisis surmounted; but almost immediately afterwards the most desperate riots followed—first directed against Catholics, or Protestant sympathisers with them,

and then, as the Government appeared to have abdicated all its functions, against everybody and everything indiscriminately.

Day by day the riots increased in intensity. "Never," says the *Annual Register*, "did the metropolis, in any known age, exhibit such a dreadful spectacle of calamity and horror; or experience such real danger, terror, and distress, as on the day and night of the 7th. It is said that it was beheld blazing in thirty-six different places from one spot. Some of these conflagrations were of such a magnitude as to be truly tremendous. . . . Those who were on the spot or in the vicinity say that the present darkness, the gleam of the distant fires, the dreadful shouts in different quarters of the rioters, the groans of the dying, and the heavy regular platoon-firing of the soldiers formed, all together, a scene so terrific and tremendous as no description or even imagination could possibly reach. . . . The metropolis presented, in many places, the image of a city recently stormed and sacked."[1]

"Nothing ever surpassed the abominable behaviour of the ruffian apostle who preached up this storm," . . . wrote Horace Walpole.[2] "The frantic incendiary ran backwards and forwards naming names for slaughter to the mob."

And Burke, who was present at the time, has thus described this occurrence: "In the year 1780 there were found in this nation men deluded enough on pretences of zeal and piety to make a desperate attempt which would have consumed all the glory and power of this country in the flames of London, and buried all law, order, and religion, under the ruins of the metropolis of the Protestant world. . . . All the time this horrid scene was

[1] *Annual Register*, 1780, p. 194. [2] Walpole's *Letters*, vol. vii. p. 378.

"acting, the wicked instigators of this unhappy multitude continued without interruption, pity, or remorse, to blow up the blind rage of the populace with a continued blast of pestilential libels, which infected the very air we breathed in. The main drift of all these libels, and all the riots, was to force Parliament (to persuade us was hopeless) into an act of national perfidy which has no example."

For nearly a week the rioting and burning and plundering continued—jails were fired and destroyed, and the prisoners let loose.

So dilatory were the Ministers in taking measures to suppress the rioting, that they laid themselves open to the charge of "a meditated encouragement to this fanatic tumult, in order to discountenance the Association, which had more serious objects in view, and to render odious and contemptible all popular interposition in affairs of State."

At last, however, the King himself intervened; vigorous military action was taken; and after some 300 lives or more had been lost, order was restored. The slower, but none the less sure, process of the civil law followed; many of the rioters were tried and executed, and the lesson was taught, in letters of life's blood, that violent methods of seeking the enforcement of particular views could not be tolerated.

For many a long year afterwards this unfortunate episode was made political capital of against any popular movement, and more especially against the use of the Platform. It was said that the riots were the offspring of the Petition, and the lamentable consequences of this particular Petition and Association were deemed good ground for discouraging all Petitions and Associations. It is true that the violent outrages

perpetrated by the rioters followed the action of a political association, which had, in part, furthered its aims by means of meetings and speeches; and that the immediate cause of the horrible outrages was the direct incitement of the President of the Association, in a speech which was published in the newspapers, to a course which was fraught with danger, and which might lead, as it did, to most disastrous results. But it was in the most eminent degree unfair to use this event, as so many have done, as a final and decisive argument against the Platform. In the first place, the riots would never have occurred except for the criminal negligence, if not connivance, of the Government. Any, even moderate precautions would have prevented them, or at any rate have at once checked them. Where no effort is made to maintain order, order will not be maintained, even though no Platform incitement to disorder be given. The exercise of free speech will sometimes be abused; but it would be folly to attempt to silence all speech on that account; that is the wrong way of meeting the evils of such abuse, and that was the line taken by the governing authorities of that day and time. We must ever discount their views, and those of many of their successors, on this somewhat thorny subject, with the reflection that they had the deepest interest in maintaining the existing order of things; and that in that existing order there were many things which could not bear discussion, or investigation, or exposure to the public gaze. We cannot, in fact, consider them impartial authorities in anything appertaining to the Platform or free discussion.

CHAPTER IV

THE ELECTION PLATFORM

MANY years were to elapse before another great outburst of Platform activity took place, and the progress of the Platform from this time down to the eve of that tremendous convulsion—the French Revolution—is to be traced in its action at the general elections of 1780, of 1784, in the incidents of the continuance of the movement set on foot by the Yorkshire Association for economic reform, and in the movement which was now about to take more definite shape and cohesion in favour of Parliamentary reform.

The immediate effect of the Gordon riots had been to strengthen the position of the Government, for however miserable had been the incapacity exhibited by the Ministers in dealing with them, the scenes of horror which had been witnessed, and the enormities which had been perpetrated, inspired a greater dread of popular meetings than condemnation of the Ministry.[1] This sudden antipathy to public demonstrations extended to the county meetings, petitions, and all forms of association, and consequently to all applications for redress of grievances, and schemes for a reform in the representation of the Commons House of Parliament.

[1] See *The Annual Register*, 1781, p. 137.

Parliament was nearing the end of its septennial life. "There was every reason to expect," said the writer in *The Annual Register*, "that, in the present state of things, and disposition of the people, the elections would go greatly in favour of the Court. A dissolution was accordingly determined upon; but the design was kept concealed in the most profound secrecy. . . . The Proclamation for dissolving the Parliament operated like a thunderclap, with respect to suddenness and surprise, . . . the shortness of the time allotted for the elections increased the difficulties and disadvantages to those who were at a distance from their boroughs or interests, and who had taken no previous measures of security. From these and from the other causes we have mentioned, the elections went much in favour of the Court, and several of the most popular members, whose public conduct seemed to receive the general approbation of their constituents were, notwithstanding, thrown out of their seats."

"One hundred and thirteen new men obtained seats in Parliament. The poverty of the times, operating along with the general hopelessness which now prevailed, that any opposition in Parliament would be capable of producing a beneficial alteration in the conduct of public affairs, had both together so powerful an effect, that candidates were not to be found who would support the usual expensive contests of the counties. No general election, perhaps for a century, produced so little expense in that respect. Several members of the late Parliament, who were tired of a constant fruitless attendance and opposition, either determined to retire entirely from public business, or grew very indifferent as to the event of their elections. The general venality which now appeared among the electors, and that contempt of

"their own declarations and resolutions, as well as of all past faithful service which it produced, could not fail highly to disgust many, and to render them still more hopeless of public affairs."[1]

Such is the account of this election given by *The Annual Register*.

The deep despondency which was felt by some of the popular party finds eloquent and pathetic expression in the written address issued by Sir George Savile to the electors of Yorkshire.[2]

"The satisfaction and honour of attending your business has ever overbalanced the labour; but my attendance during the last Parliament has been something worse than laborious; it has been discouraging, grievous, and painful. . . .

"I return to you, baffled and dispirited, and I am sorry that truth obliges me to add, with hardly a ray of hope of seeing any change in the miserable course of public calamities.

"On this melancholy day of account, in rendering up to you my trust, I deliver to you your share of a country, maimed and weakened, its treasure lavished and misspent, its honours faded, and its conduct the laughing-stock of Europe; our nation in a manner without allies or friends, except such as we have hired to destroy our fellow-subjects, and to ravage a country, in which we once claimed an invaluable share. I return to you some of your principal privileges impeached and mangled. And, lastly, I leave you, as I conceive, at this hour and moment fully, effectually, and absolutely, under the discretion and power of a military force which is to act without waiting for the authority of the civil magistrate.

[1] The Government itself spent £53,000 on this election.—See *Correspondence between George III. and Lord North*, vol. ii. pp. 421-427.

[2] See *The Leeds Intelligencer*, 12th September 1780.

. . . But under all these disheartening circumstances I could yet entertain a cheerful hope, and undertake again the commission with alacrity, as well as zeal, if I could see any effectual steps taken to remove the original cause of the mischief. *Then would there be a hope.* Till the purity of the constituent body, and thereby that of the representative, be restored, there is NONE."

It appears that there were contests in only three counties in the whole of England. In the boroughs, however, there was an increase—59 borough seats having been contested.[1] The newspapers of the time supply some further details about the election which, from the Platform point of view, are interesting. *The Gazetteer* gives us a glimpse of Fox:[2] "At a meeting under the portico of St. Paul's, Covent Garden, for the purpose of electing representatives to serve the city of Westminster in Parliament, Mr. C. Fox rose and depicted the losses and degeneracy of our affairs in the strongest colours; the knavery and the folly of the authors of our calamities with the most poignant satire. 'Who,' said he, 'are these Ministers that presume to impose a man upon you? If a Pitt in the height of the glory of his administration had deigned to make such an attempt, his conduct would have been unjustifiable; but for these men who have brought this country to ruin and bankruptcy to dare to make so impudent an attempt is to offer you the highest insult.' His great exertions made him hoarse, and he recruited himself by drinking once or twice, amidst the acclamations of the multitude."

It is also noteworthy that a larger number of speeches are reported at this election than at previous ones, and more elections are referred to at which

[1] See *The Register of Parliamentary Contested Elections*, by H. S. Smith, 3 vols.

[2] See *The Gazetteer*, 8th September 1780.

speeches were stated to have been made. The speeches at the elections for London city, Westminster, Surrey, and Middlesex, are reported at some length, and there were a great many of them, owing to the length of time the polling lasted.

From a criticism in *The Morning Chronicle*[1] it may safely be inferred that greater public attention was beginning to be paid to election speeches. The article is worth quoting some extracts from. "Mr. Burke's speech to the electors of Bristol was," says the critic, "a fine piece of eloquence, though it had a small tinge of the *prédicateur* in its colouring.

"Mr. Lascelles speaks to his late constituents (Yorkshire) with the bluntness and sincerity of an honest Englishman who, feeling in his own mind no wish to impose shackles on those who are to elect him, disdains to put on fetters himself, and fairly tells them he will go to Parliament free, or not at all.

"Mr. Sheridan uses the short phrase of a man determined to pursue a purpose upon which he has already formed his opinion.

"Mr. Baker, with an honesty rarely exampled, after he is crowned with success, declares he is determined to obtain justice for his constituents in a matter which no longer refers to his interest; and Mr. Selwyn, without a pun, and contrary to his character, in a style *très furieuse*, tells the freemen of Gloucester his mind and the cause of his resentment.

"In London, Alderman Clarke has spoken a very decent, manly language, while Alderman Sawbridge has blubbered like a schoolboy."

A good deal of interest was evidently taken in some of the elections; thus at Epsom, the polling-place for

[1] See *The Morning Chronicle*, 21st September 1780.

Surrey,[1] "the crowds were so great in all the avenues leading to the hustings by the different friends of the separate candidates who *listed* under their respective banners, colours, etc., that there was no possibility of passing the streets with safety."

At Windsor, we are told,[2] "the King was making the strongest interest against Admiral Keppel."

At Coventry and at Bristol there were serious riots. But this election at Bristol was memorable in a worthier and better way than rioting — for here, once more, Edmund Burke was to give an example to all future time of the highest style of election Platform oratory. He had displeased many of his constituents by certain views he had supported in the House of Commons since he had been elected their representative, and he availed himself of the Platform as the proper means of meeting his constituents and justifying himself before them. The meeting was at the Guildhall in Bristol. His speech was a masterpiece—a flawless election speech of the highest type—"Perhaps," it was said by a great judge, "the finest piece of oratory in our language." It covered the whole field of politics of the time; it went down to the great underlying principles of the questions which had engaged the attention of Parliament during the six years of its existence; and he addressed his audience in a manner even more deferential than he would have addressed the House of Commons itself.

One is tempted to quote passage after passage from it.

"Gentlemen," he exclaims in one part of it, "it is not your fond desires or mine that can alter the nature of things; by contending against which, what have we

[1] *The Gazetteer*, 12th September 1780. [2] This on Horace Walpole's authority.

"got, or ever shall get, but defeat or shame? I did not obey your instructions; no, I conformed to the instructions of truth and nature, and maintained your interest against your opinions with a constancy that became me. A representative worthy of you ought to be a person of stability. I am to look indeed to your opinions, but to such opinions as you and I *must* have five years hence. I was not to look to the flash of the day. I knew that you chose me, in my place, along with others, to be a pillar of the State, and not a weathercock on the top of the edifice, exalted for my levity and versatility, and of no use but to indicate the shiftings of every fashionable gale."

And then, as he came to the end of his speech, he said: "Gentlemen, I have had my day. I can never sufficiently express my gratitude to you for having set me in a place wherein I could lend the slightest help to great and laudable designs. If I have had my share in any measure giving quiet to private property and private conscience; if by my vote I have aided in securing to families the best possession—peace; if I have joined in reconciling kings to their subjects, and subjects to their prince; if I have assisted to loosen the foreign holdings of the citizen, and taught him to look for his protection to the laws of his country, and for his comfort to the goodwill of his countrymen; if I have thus taken my part with the best of men in the best of their actions, I can shut the book. I might wish to read a page or two more, but this is enough for my measure—I have not lived in vain.

"And now, gentlemen, on this serious day, when I come, as it were, to make up my account with you, let me take to myself some degree of honest pride on the nature of the charges that are against me. I do not

here stand before you accused of venality or of neglect of duty. It is not said that, in the long period of my service, I have in a single instance sacrificed the slightest of your interests to my ambition or to my fortune. It is not alleged that to gratify any anger or revenge of my own, or of my party, I have had a share in wronging or oppressing any description of men, or any one man in any description. No! the charges against me are all of one kind: that I have pushed the principles of general justice and benevolence too far, farther than a cautious policy would warrant, and farther than the opinions of many would go along with me. In every accident which may happen through life, in pain, in sorrow, in depression, and distress, I will call to mind this accusation, and be comforted.

"Gentlemen, I submit the whole to your judgment."

The meeting he addressed, impressed by the irresistible power of his speech, re-adopted him as the candidate; but some days after, finding the tide of prejudice running too strong against him, he retired—retired with a speech from the hustings to the assembled electors. "It has been usual," he said, "for a candidate who declines to take his leave by a letter to the sheriffs, but I received your trust in the face of day, and in the face of day I accept your dismission."

Once more had Burke endeavoured to raise the election Platform to a standard little contemplated by other politicians or even statesmen of the time—Fox perhaps alone excepted.

Sir G. Savile once said that while the existing system of representation continued, general elections could be looked on in no other light than so many septennial fairs and markets; but here was one man, the greatest

orator of his time, endeavouring by precept and example to raise the whole tone of an election. That example, shining far down into time, was too illustrious not to have had many followers, and so, as years went by, his influence made itself strongly felt.

The new Parliament assembled on the 31st October.[1] Horace Walpole[2] sums up its aspect in the phrase, "*il ne valoit pas la peine de changer.*" "There are several new members, but no novelty in style or totality of votes. The Court may have what number it chooses to buy."

Soon after it met, there was added to its members William Pitt, without either speechifying or Platforming on his part, as we see from a letter to his mother.[3]

"I have seen Sir James Lowther . . . Appleby is the place I am to represent, and the election will be made (probably in a week or ten days) without my having any trouble, or even visiting my constituents."

The general election, though dispiriting to the popular party, had not extinguished them, and the Convention of the Associated Counties, or rather as many of the counties as remained after the change of opinion that the riots in London had effected, determined to bring the subject of their grievances before the new Parliament. Some few meetings were held in the counties that still adhered to the movement, and on the 2d April 1781 a Petition was presented to the House of Commons from the delegates of the counties of York, Surrey, Hertford, Huntingdon, Middlesex, Essex, Kent, Devon, and Nottingham, and of the city of Westminster.[4] The Petition, beginning very much

[1] 1780.

[2] Walpole's *Letters*, vol. vii. p. 458.

[3] Earl Stanhope's *Life of Pitt*, vol. i. p. 47.

[4] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxii. p. 99.

as the Yorkshire one had done, set forth "that this country had been engaged for several years in a most expensive and unfortunate war; that many of our valuable colonies had declared themselves independent; that the consequences had been a large addition to the national debt, a heavy accumulation of taxes, a rapid decline of trade, manufactures, and rents; that much public money had been improvidently squandered; that there were sinecure places, exorbitant salaries, and pensions; and that the House of Commons had resolved that it was the duty of the House to provide, as far as might be, an immediate and effectual redress of the evils complained of; that nothing had been done, and they therefore besought the House to proceed to inquire into and redress those grievances, and to deal with the growing influence of the Crown, and to economise expenditure." But the new Parliament was not favourably disposed to Petitions for reforms or any other outcome of the Platform. One member said he "had opposed, within and without, every attempt to form Associations and Committees, which he held to be both dangerous and illegal," and declared that "every scheme for reformation should originate in the House, which contained the only true delegates of the people."

The Solicitor-General for Scotland took a more technical line. He asserted that "As freeholders the Petitioners were represented in Parliament,[1] and might have had their alleged grievances laid before the House in constitutional form by their respective representatives. It was, he thought, the duty of Parliament to suppress Associations, by preventing their resolutions and views from taking effect."

The Solicitor-General for England "totally con-

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxii. p. 161.

"demned associations, delegations, and committees." He thought associations were attended with danger, "because, when such associations were entered into, when the minds of men were agitated and carried forward to objects of reformation, no man could say where it would end. National ferment, once created, was not easily quieted, and the ablest men might be overborne by that power to which they had undesignedly given an existence, in order to promote the most beneficial purposes, but which, in its exercise, might be employed, not to the maintenance, preservation, and improvement of the Constitution, but to its utter subversion." [1]

Dunning, who happily had survived the general election, replied effectively to these official views. As regards the Associations which had lately been formed in the most respectable counties of England, "their greatest enemy could not charge them with uproar, or even with heat; their proceedings had been grave, deliberate, and orderly. They had met to exercise a lawful right: that of petitioning their representatives in Parliament; and in doing this, they had observed the most steady decorum, the strictest regard to public tranquillity." [2]

The motion that the Petition be referred to a Committee of the whole House was of course rejected by a large majority (212—135). This repulse may be considered as ending the first part of the work of the Central Committee or Convention of the County Associations; for, by this time, many of the counties had withdrawn from it, other questions of deep moment monopolised the attention of Parliament, and other subjects of grave import absorbed the attention of the country. But the remaining deputies or delegates from

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxii. p. 191, 1781. [2] *Ibid.* p. 198.

the counties continued to meet in London, and proceeded to turn their attention to the subject which had caused the split in the movement, Parliamentary reform.

One little stir of life in the Platform in 1781 is thus recorded in Horace Walpole's *Journal*[1]—

On the 4th December the Livery of London had a large meeting, and voted "an admirable and most severe remonstrance to the King against the continuation of the American war, which they said the Speech threatened. They besought the King to remove both his public and private counsellors, and used these stunning and memorable words: 'Your armies are captured; the wonted superiority of your navies is annihilated; your dominions are lost.'"

And on the 10th there was "a great meeting of Westminster voters in Westminister Hall, to consider a Petition similar to the City's. It was moved by Charles Fox, and approved, but with the utmost tranquillity, for the people, though in vast numbers, seemed to be perfectly indifferent, and assembled only from curiosity; yet the Court, fearing or *hoping* a tumult, had a large body of guards in readiness."

And there was also a meeting of the inhabitants of Southwark, where a similar Petition was adopted. Early in the following year the Ministry of Lord North, after an existence of twelve years, came to an end; and such was the revolt from high Toryism, which had landed the country in such disasters, that a Whig Government succeeded it, the Marquis of Rockingham becoming Prime Minister, and Lord Shelburne and Fox becoming Secretaries of State.

This administration was shortlived, but under it the

[1] Walpole's *Journal*, vol. ii. pp. 482, 483.

House of Commons brought itself formally to acknowledge the errors it had committed in the treatment of Mr. Wilkes and the Middlesex electors, some thirteen years previously, and did so in the most thorough manner, by ordering that all declarations, orders, and resolutions respecting the election of John Wilkes, and his incapacity to be elected a member to serve in the said Parliament, should be expunged from the Journals of that House "as being subversive of the rights of the whole body of electors of this kingdom." [1]

What a commentary on all the arguments of the Ministers and of "the King's friends," which were used when those resolutions were being placed there. What a triumph for the Platform. Several measures were also passed during this Administration which had been distinctly called for by the Platform, and which, therefore, may be regarded as the first-fruits of the Platform in legislation. A measure of economy was introduced by Burke, and carried; part only of the large and comprehensive plan which he had submitted to Parliament two years before, but still something, for it abolished a number of offices usually held by members of Parliament, and effected an annual saving of £70,000.

Such had been the impetus given by the Platform to popular legislation, that two other measures were carried, tending to the improvement of the constitution of Parliament and the diminution of corrupt influence therein. The first was an Act excluding contractors from the House of Commons, and the second was a measure debarring revenue officers—of whom there were from 40,000 to 60,000 in an electoral body of about 300,000—from voting at Parliamentary elections. The disfranchisement of these Government automata,

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxii. p. 1411.

this crew, whose interest it was to vote for any government nominee, and who were absolutely dependent for their situations on the Ministers of the day, was, as Mr. Lecky says, "by far the most serious blow that had ever been administered to Government influence at elections."[1]

But it was in its larger aspects that Parliamentary reform was sighed for and desired; and from this time on, for the next half century, the question was never lost sight of by the Platform. Ministries might rise and fall, great events might make the great heart of the civilised world palpitate with interest or horror, war might follow peace, and peace war, the most vital interests of the country might be imperilled, each and every one of these events, in greater or less degree, would evoke expressions of feeling from the people by means of the Platform, but the reform of Parliament, or rather of the House of Commons, was the one abiding subject which, the instant the temporary excitement was over, was harked back to by the people, and when not treated solely by itself, was tacked on to whatever other subject happened to be forced on the attention of the country. Truly, had some of the leading reformers of the day discerned that here lay the real measure to be striven for; and gradually was the belief burning itself ever deeper into the minds of larger numbers of the people. It is no condemnation of the Platform that many visionary schemes and expedients by way of reform were set afloat, for the true remedy for a great national disease is not all at once to be discovered. The general direction may be ascertained, but the particular road that will lead to it is not always so clear. It was but natural that men's thoughts should

[1] *History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, vol. iv. p. 218.

turn in this direction. To succeed in obtaining some voice in their own House was the only way to secure the reform of abuses, and the amelioration of the state of the people.

One great writer after another had condemned the existing system.

"To what gross absurdities," wrote Locke, "the following of custom, when reason has left it, may lead, we may be satisfied, when we see the bare name of a town, of which there remains not so much as the ruins, where scarce so much housing as a sheep-cote, or more inhabitants than a shepherd is to be found, sends as many representatives to the grand assembly of law-makers as a whole county numerous in people, and powerful in riches. This strangers stand amazed at, and, every one must confess, needs a remedy." [1]

The result of the then existing state of Parliamentary representation was that the commons, or people of the country, had not the actual election of the House of Commons. So far from it, the House was, as a body, more frequently opposed to the people than on their side. Burke recognised this clearly. He said: "A House of Commons which in all disputes between the people and the Administration presumes against the people, which punishes their disorders, but refuses even to inquire into their provocations, is an unnatural, a monstrous state of things in the Constitution."

And even so it was—both unnatural and monstrous. And the majority of that House, so far from being elected even by any appreciable portion of the people, was returned either by men who were coerced or bribed

[1] Locke, *Of Civil Government*, chap. xiii.

into returning certain nominees, or in a very large number of cases by men who practically elected themselves. Burgh,[1] in his *Political Disquisitions*, described this state of things: "A handful of beggars," he wrote, "either tempted by a bribe, or awed by the threats of a man in power, elect or re-elect as many as they are bid. And so the House comes to be filled with the tools of a minister."

And Oldfield, in his *Entire and Complete History, Political and Personal, of the Boroughs of Great Britain*, wrote: "Thus is the legislative part of our Constitution made of some members who represent neither houses nor persons; of others who are the representatives only of single individuals; and of many whose constituents do not exceed ten in number."

The places sending representatives to Parliament had been so judiciously selected by the governing powers in previous reigns, as to exclude the more important centres of wealth, population, and intellectual activity; and as England progressed in wealth and population this evil was becoming ever more and more magnified. It is needless to quote statistics, the facts are notorious, and were self-evident then to all who were beginning to take a deeper interest in the political life of their country.

It was not from the Platform that the first real rousing incentive to the reform of Parliament came, but, as we have seen, from Lord Chatham, when, in his famous speech in the House of Lords in 1770, he proposed "to infuse a new portion of health into the Constitution."

Beckford had alluded to the question on the Electoral Platform in 1761, as we may remember, but the real incentive to action came from Lord Chatham.

[1] Published in 1774, p. 50.

Parliament, however, turned a deaf ear to the suggestion; would have none of it. Not so the Platform, which hailed it enthusiastically as its own, and which thenceforward gave it its constant unforgetting attention, using every occasion on which Government laid itself open to censure to enforce the moral that no Government could be satisfactory until Parliamentary reform was effected. Unfortunately the different nature of the remedies proposed, the extravagance of some of them, and the injudicious way in which they were argued, prevented them receiving the consideration the subject was entitled to. But unceasingly, and in spite of every obstacle, it was persevered with, and when not being carried rapidly along by recurrent gusts of popular agitation, it was being quietly pushed forward by other influences.

The history of the struggle for Parliamentary reform is usually traced in Parliament, but its real history was outside Parliament.

It was the people outside Parliament who wanted Parliament reformed—not those inside. During the half-century over which the struggle for reform was prolonged, the whole vital force of the demand for reform came from outside. It was the spokesmen, the orators of the people outside who kept the demand for it alive—who pressed it on Parliament in season, and, to Parliament men, always, out of season. Now and then the demand was urged in Parliament by some ardent Member of the Liberal Party, but such demand was the result of outside activity, outside pressure. It was by the Platform and not by Parliament that the question was pushed—it was by the Platform and not by Parliament that the victory was finally won.

Stated shortly, the actual grievance felt peculiarly

at this time was the perpetual acquiescence of the House of Commons in the dictation of the Ministers of the Crown.

Lord Rockingham, ex-Prime Minister, speaking in 1780,[1] had stated it pretty clearly. He said: "It was, early in the present reign, promulged as a Court axiom that the power and influence of the Crown alone was sufficient to support any set of men his Majesty might think proper to call to his Councils.

"The fact bore evidence of its truth; for, through the influence of the Crown, majorities had been procured to support any men or any measures which an Administration, thus constituted, thought proper to dictate. This was the origin of all our national misfortunes.

"Combining the measures of the present reign together, he would say, that they presented such a system of corruption, public venality, and despotism, as never before took place in any limited Government."

And Burke[2] also had spoken out, quite unmistakably, about it. "The whole of our grievances," he said, "are owing to the fatal and overgrown influence of the Crown. Formerly the operation of the influence of the Crown only touched the higher orders of the State. It has now insinuated itself into every creek and cranny in the kingdom."

The evil was patent. No intelligent and impartial person could fail to see it, and as to remedy, the only one was equally evident—a reform of the House of Commons.

The action of the Convention of Delegates, which had been so much reprobated in 1780—namely, the grafting of Parliamentary reform on the subject of economic

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xx. p. 1346 (8th February 1780).

[2] *Ibid.* p. 1297.

reform—produced nevertheless one great result. It kept the question of Parliamentary reform before the public; and on the 7th May 1782 William Pitt, stimulated partly by the action of the persevering remnant of the Convention of the Associated Counties, partly by his own inclinations and ambitions, and, possibly, partly by the vehemently declared opinions of his father, brought the subject forward in Parliament.

Fox, at a later period of his career, gives a more graphic picture of this debate than do the bald records of the Parliamentary history of the day. Fox said:[1] "Towards the end of the war with America, it became extremely unpopular, and the King's Ministers lost the confidence of the nation. In the year 1780 a dissolution took place, and then it was naturally imagined by superficial observers who did not examine the real state of representation, that the people would have returned a Parliament that would have unequivocally spoken their sentiments on the occasion. What was the case? The change was very small indeed, not more than three or four persons were added to the number of those who had from the beginning opposed the disastrous career of the Ministers in that war. Lord North himself said: 'What! can you contend that the war is unpopular, after the declaration in its favour that the people have made by their choice of representatives? The general election is the proof that the war continues to be the war of the people of England.' Yet," said Fox, "it was notoriously otherwise; so much so, that Mr. Pitt made a just and striking use of it to demonstrate the necessity of Parliamentary reform. He referred to this event as a demonstration of this doctrine. 'You see,' said he, 'that so defective, so inadequate, is the present practice, at

[1] *Parliamentary History*, 1797, vol. xxxiii. p. 710.

least of the elective franchise, that no impression of national calamity, no conviction of ministerial error, no abhorrence of disastrous war, is sufficient to stand against that corrupt influence which has mixed itself with election, and which drowns and stifles the popular voice.' Upon this statement, and upon this unanswerable argument, the Right Honourable Gentleman acted in the year 1782."

Pitt's own recorded words are: "At last the voice of the people has happily prevailed, and we are now blessed with a ministry whose wishes went along with those of the people, for a moderate reform of the errors which had intruded themselves into the Constitution. . . . The representatives had ceased, in a great degree, to be connected with the people. It was of the essence of the Constitution that the people should have a share in the Government by the means of representation. The representation as it now stood was incomplete."[1]

He did not produce any definite plan, but moved for an inquiry on the subject, and he was only defeated by 20 votes; 141 having voted for his motion, and 161 against it.

Immediately afterwards a "numerous and respectable meeting" of Members of Parliament friendly to a constitutional representation of Parliament, and of the members of several committees of counties and cities was held at the Thatched House Tavern (on 18th May), the Lord Mayor of London in the chair, and Pitt himself being present, when it was resolved[2]—

"That the motion of the Honourable William Pitt, for the reform of Parliament having been defeated, it is

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxii. p. 1416.

[2] Wyvill's *Political Papers*, vol. i. p. 425.

"become indispensably necessary that application should be made to Parliament by Petition from the collective body of the people in their respective districts, requesting a substantial reformation of the Commons House of Parliament.

"That this meeting is of opinion that the sense of the people should be taken at such times as may be convenient during this summer, in order to lay their petitions before Parliament early next Session."

The resolutions were in Pitt's own handwriting,[1] and are intensely interesting as showing that he was in favour of the system of the people meeting and petitioning. In accordance with the resolution thus come to, the Platform was set to work; numerous meetings were held during the Parliamentary recess, and on the 24th of February in the following year (1783) a Petition was presented from 10,000 freeholders of the county of York,[2] including the Lord Lieutenant of the county, praying for a more equal representation of the people in Parliament; and on 7th May several Petitions were presented from the freeholders in the county of Kent, from the electors of Westminster, and from various other places and persons, praying for a reform in the representation of the people in Parliament.[3]

Pitt, who, since last he brought forward the subject, had filled the office of Chancellor of the Exchequer under Lord Shelburne for some months, again urged the question. "He reminded the House how, and upon what reasons the public had begun to look at the state of Parliamentary representation. He stated that the disastrous consequences of the American war, the immense expenditure of the public money, the con-

[1] See *State Trials*, vol. xxii. p. 493.

[2] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxiii. p. 571.

[3] *Ibid.* p. 826.

sequent heavy burden of taxes, and the pressure of all the collateral difficulties produced by the foregoing circumstances, gradually disgusted the people, and at last provoked them 'to turn their eyes inward on themselves' in order to see if there was not something radically wrong at home, that was the chief cause of all the evils they felt from their misfortunes abroad.[1]

"Searching for the internal sources of their foreign fatalities, they naturally turned their attention to the Constitution under which they lived, and to the practice of it. Upon looking to that House they found that by length of time, by the origin and progress of undue influence, and from other causes, the spirit of liberty, and the powers of check and control upon the Crown and the executive Government, were greatly lessened and debilitated. Hence, clamours sprung up without doors, and hence, in the moment of anxiety to procure an adequate and fit remedy to a practical grievance, a spirit of speculation went forth, and a variety of schemes, founded in visionary and impracticable ideas of reform, were suddenly produced. . . .

"The House itself had discovered that a secret influence of the Crown was sapping the very foundation of liberty by corruption; the influence of the Crown had been felt within those walls, and had often been found strong enough to stifle the sense of duty, and to overrule the propositions made to satisfy the wishes and desires of the people. The House of Commons had been base enough to feed the influence that enslaved its members, and thus was at one time the parent and offspring of corruption. This influence, however, had risen to such a height that men were ashamed any longer to deny its existence, and the House had at

[1] *Parliamentary History*, 1783, vol. xxiii. p. 828, etc.

"length been driven to the necessity of voting that it ought to be diminished. . . . The House of Commons, which, according to the true spirit of the Constitution, should be the guardian of the people's freedom, the constitutional check and control over the executive power, would, through this influence, degenerate into a mere engine of tyranny and oppression, to destroy the Constitution in effect, though it should in its outward form still remain."

After dismissing "universal suffrage" and the abolition of rotten boroughs as impracticable, he suggested an increase of county members, and urgently pressed the necessity of something being done in compliance with the petitions that had been presented complaining of the present state of the representation.

So much was involved in this great question of Parliamentary reform, that it is not surprising that a resolute stand should have been made against it by the King and Court party.

Lord North, as ex-Prime Minister, spoke strongly against it. He protested against the assumption implied in any demand for reform, that members of the House should be representatives specially of the people who chose them. He said: "We are not the deputies but the representatives of the people. We are not to refer to them before we determine. We stand here as they would stand, to use our own discretion, without seeking any other guidance under heaven."[1]

A view which some time later he took occasion to reiterate in greater amplitude: "That House, constituted as it was, represented the whole kingdom. Those gentlemen who held that the instructions of constituents ought on all occasions to be complied with did not know

[1] *Parliamentary History*, 1783, vol. xxiii. p. 853.

the Constitution of their country.[1] To surrender their own judgments, to abandon their own opinions, and to act as their constituents thought proper to instruct them, right or wrong, was to act unconstitutionally. Let them recollect who and what they were. They were not sent there, like the States General, to represent a particular province or district, and to take care of the particular interests of that particular province; they were sent there as trustees, to act for the benefit and advantage of the whole kingdom. The moment a gentleman took his seat he was to consider himself as a representative of all England, and as bound to take as much care of the interests of one part of the Empire as another. The idea, therefore, of complying in all cases with the instructions of constituents was an idea directly repugnant to the constitution of Parliament, and to the functions and duties of its members."

Pitt's proposal was rejected by a large majority—293 voting against it, and 149 for it. Evidently the Platform had not much real power yet as a political engine —indeed a whole generation was to pass before it would have strength enough to force reform from even that part of the Constitution which was considered the popular House.

In extenuation of some of the opposition to reform we must bear in mind what many Englishmen thought of the English Constitution. Pitt's eloquent language in the speech already quoted from puts their views as well as they could be put: "No man saw that glorious fabric, the Constitution of this country, with more admiration, nor with more reverence, than himself; he beheld it with wonder, with veneration, and with gratitude; it gave an Englishman such dear and valuable

[1] *Parliamentary History*, 1784, vol. xxiv. p. 988.

"privileges, or he might say, such advantageous and dignified prerogatives, that were not only beyond the reach of the subjects of every other nation, but afforded us a degree of happiness unknown to those who lived under governments of a nature less pregnant with principles of liberty. Indeed, there was no form of Government on the known surface of the globe that was so nearly allied to perfect freedom."[1]

Contemporary literature and, indeed, events prove, unfortunately, however, that the great bulk of the opposition to reform rose from selfish or sordid ends. The power of government, the emolument of office and patronage, the luxury of sinecures, the love of rank and social position—all these had a far more powerful influence on the great majority of the upper classes of the time than these fine ideas so eloquently expressed by Pitt. The adverse division against Reform checked the question temporarily. On 29th May 1783 Horace Walpole wrote:[2] "We have subsided suddenly into a comfortable calm. Not only war has disappeared, but also the jostling of Ministries, the hostilities of factions, the turbulence of County Associations. The signal repulse given to the proposed reformation of Parliament seems to have dashed all that rashness of innovation."

But the question was not lost sight of. It was soon after this (on 15th August 1783) that a letter was written by the Duke of Richmond to Colonel Sharman, which, time after time, in later years was quoted by many an advocate of Reform, and the gist of which had best be given here.

The Duke wrote: "The lesser Reform has been attempted with every possible advantage in its favour;

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxiii. p. 828.

[2] Walpole's *Letters*, vol. viii. p. 370.

not only from the zealous support of the advocates of a more effectual one, but from the assistance of men of great weight, both in and out of power. But with all these temperaments and helps it has failed. Not one proselyte has been gained from corruption, nor has the least ray of hope been held out from any quarter, that the House of Commons was inclined to adopt any other mode of Reform. The weight of corruption has crushed this more gentle, as it would have defeated any more efficacious plan, in the same circumstances. From that quarter, therefore, I have nothing to hope. IT IS FROM THE PEOPLE AT LARGE THAT I EXPECT ANY GOOD. And I am convinced that the only way to make them feel that they are really concerned in the business is to contend for their full, clear, and indisputable rights of universal representation."

The remarkable feature in the history of the Platform at this period is, that no sooner was it checked in one direction than it would burst out in another; and, having gathered fresh strength, could return, with increased powers, to attack the position from which it had been repulsed.

Checked temporarily in the Reform question, the fierce struggle which centred round the Coalition Ministry, and the elevation of Pitt to the Prime Ministership, created numerous occasions for the use of the Platform, and that, after all, was what the Platform wanted for the growth of its power.

On the death of the Marquis of Rockingham, Lord Shelburne had been appointed Prime Minister. His Ministry rapidly fell to pieces, and he resigned. The celebrated Coalition Ministry was formed with the Duke of Portland at the head, and Fox and Lord North Secretaries of State.

"There were circumstances which rendered this junction peculiarly abhorrent," and the country was "at once astonished and scandalised." Seldom had two Ministers been more bitterly opposed to each other than Fox and Lord North. For years they had been the bitterest and most outspoken foes, but now, wiping out all the things they had said against each other, they formed a coalition which, having regard to the numbers of their respective followers in Parliament, gave them a large majority in the House of Commons. The King, unable at the time to get any other Ministry, had no choice but to accept them.

"Finding," his Majesty wrote,[1] "on the coolest reflection, when the supplies are not yet found for the navy, army, and unfunded debt, that a bankruptcy must ensue if I did not sacrifice myself to the necessities of my people, I have taken the bitter potion of appointing the seven Ministers named by the Duke of Portland and Lord North to kiss hands, who are after that to form their plan of arrangements."

No sooner were the Ministers installed in office than the King began planning their overthrow.

They introduced a plan for the better government of India, which did not meet with royal favour. Unable to secure its rejection in the Commons, where it was supported by large majorities, the King secured its rejection in the House of Lords by deliberate threats of royal displeasure, which, of course, then meant a good deal. He authorised Lord Temple to protest against the proposed Bill.

"His Majesty allows Earl Temple to say that whoever voted for the India Bill was not only not his

[1] George III. to Lord Ashburton, 2d April 1783, Morrison MSS.—*Parliamentary Papers*, 1883, vol. xxxvii. p. 482.

friend, but would be considered by him as an enemy; and if these words were not strong enough, Earl Temple might use whatever words he might deem stronger, and more to the purpose."

In vain did the House of Commons pass condemnatory resolutions. Sir Erskine May has well summarised the situation. He said: "The strange spectacle was here exhibited of a King plotting against his own Ministers, of the Ministers inveighing against the conduct of their royal master, of the House of Commons supporting them, and condemning the King, and of the King defying at once his Ministers and the House of Commons, and trusting to his influence with the peers. The King's tactics prevailed. On the very day on which the Commons agreed to these strong remonstrances against his interference, it was crowned with complete success. The India Bill was rejected by the House of Lords, and the next day the King followed up his advantage by at once dismissing his Ministers."[1]

The King now chose Pitt as Prime Minister, who entered on an apparently forlorn hope. The moment he assumed the duties of his office, the hostile majority in the Commons passed resolutions of want of confidence in the Ministers. The King refused to change them, and Pitt, claiming that the nation was behind him, refused to resign.[2]

The majority of the House of Commons appeared to be powerless. Fox had made the grievous miscalculation that a majority of the House of Commons could compel the Crown to dismiss its Ministers, or could oblige the Ministers themselves to resign. It could

[1] *Constitutional History of England*, by Sir T. Erskine May, vol. i. p. 60.

[2] *Essay on Pitt.*

neither do one nor the other, at this period of history, and that is, for us now, a most instructive landmark.

Pitt's assertion that the nation was behind him was daily being made good. His fighting almost single-handed against a powerful opposition enlisted the widest sympathy; his championing the King endeared him to all whose political creed could be summed up in the formula, "for King and Church."

"The Throne and the Altar were made the catch-words, and under them was comprehended every man's property, and influence, and consequence in life—all of which he was persuaded he should lose unless he supported the measures of the Administration."

"Never was there a period," says Bishop Tomline,[1] in his life of Pitt, "when the national opinion was more strongly or more generally expressed. Almost every county, city, and considerable corporation in the kingdom, not under the immediate influence of the adverse interest, presented addresses to the Throne, in which they returned their warmest thanks to his Majesty for dismissing his late Ministers from his service, and declared their firm resolution to support him in the defence of the lawful rights of his Crown."

In some of these proceedings the aid of the Platform was invoked.

Contemporary newspapers[2] give a description of one of the meetings, which is specially interesting, as it presents Edmund Burke to us in the character of a Platform speaker, different somewhat from that in which he had appeared at Bristol. There he spoke from the electoral Platform; here he spoke at a county meeting.

[1] *Memoirs of the Life of the Right Honourable William Pitt*, by George Tomline, D.D., vol. i. p. 441.

[2] *The Morning Chronicle*, 23d March 1784; also *The Morning Herald*.

The magnates of the Tory party in Buckinghamshire determined on getting up an Address to the King to thank him for dismissing his late Ministry, and a meeting was accordingly held on the 20th March at Aylesbury—"the most numerous and respectable that has been remembered in the county of Bucks."

When the adoption of the Address had been proposed Sir William Lee rose and expressed his disapprobation of it. Mr. Aubrey, M.P., spoke in favour of it. Burke, the greatest of orators, then rose, but was prevented speaking "by repeated hisses and groans from the audience." Lord Mahon then came forward and requested them to hear Mr. Burke fairly, and he trusted they would answer him completely. Mr. Burke then obtained an audience. He said this had not been the first time that he had been hissed in public; he had received that mark of disapprobation upon former occasions when his conduct had proved right in the end. It would always be his maxim to pursue the good of the people without regard to their smiles or frowns. He found that they had made up their minds on the subject of the Address, but nevertheless he should speak his sentiments upon it. He expatiated on the danger of diminishing the power of the House of Commons, on which the existence of the liberties of this country depended. He observed that the other States of Europe had been free, but had successively lost their liberties, and that if they annihilated the present House of Commons they would never get such another. Here he was interrupted by a cry of "Not so bad a one." However, he proceeded at length in defence of the late Administration and of the India Bill. He rallied Mr. Aubrey upon not having delivered his sentiments in Parliament upon the India Bill. That was the proper

place to discuss questions of so delicate a nature, and not popular assemblies like the present. He said the people were not competent to decide upon such points. They had approved of the American War in the same senseless manner they now disapproved of the India Bill; they had not capacity to comprehend it. He said he had warmly supported it, and he desired that might be remembered and might descend as a monument to posterity. He concluded with thanking them for the candour with which they had heard him. *The Morning Chronicle* reporter said: "He showed the eloquent and able orator throughout the whole of his speech, which lasted about three-quarters of an hour, and which was upon the whole well heard, allowing for the warmth and earnestness with which the freeholders present espoused the Address."

Lord Mahon then spoke. His speech was "a very able and complete refutation of what had been urged by Mr. Burke." Mr. Coke, M.P. for Norfolk, began to speak. He said he was a supporter of the India Bill. "This occasioned a general indignation expressed by hissing and hooting and such a complication of noises that he withdrew." The Address was adopted.

"Where," says a correspondent of *The Morning Herald*—"where is the use of convening public meetings if, as in the above instance, every method is taken by the ministerial partisans to drown all arguments that militate against them in noise and clamour, and by that means prevent the independent elector from impartially judging of the justice of their cause."

There is also extant for our edification an interesting description of another meeting of the most crucial import in the struggle between the Crown and the majority of the House of Commons. It occurred

on the familiar ground of York, and the prize was the adherence of that great county to the one side or the other. Success in Yorkshire was "the sheet-anchor of the Coalition"; whilst, on the other side, an Address to the King would, it was thought, prove a deathblow to the future hopes of the Coalition. The Yorkshire Association had already decided against the Coalition, and a meeting of the county was convened to settle whether it would declare the same way.

The meeting took place on 25th of March—"a cold hailing day"; it was held in the Castle Yard at York, and lasted from ten o'clock in the morning till half-past four o'clock in the afternoon. "In those days they kept up a vast deal of state, and the great men all drove up in their coaches and six. An immense body of the freeholders was present. It was a wonderful meeting for order and fair hearing."[1] An address to the King condemning the Coalition Ministry was proposed by Mr. Buck, and supported by Mr. H. Duncombe and others. On the other side appeared Lord John Cavendish, Lord Fitzwilliam, and many other men of rank and influence. When the proposers of the Address had spoken, and the Whig Lords had been heard in answer, the day was far advanced, and the listeners were growing weary of the contest. At this time Mr. Wilberforce mounted the table, from which, under a great wooden canopy before the High Sheriff's chair, the various speakers had addressed the meeting. "The weather was so bad that it seemed," says an eyewitness, "as if his slight frame would be unable to make head against its violence. The Castle Yard too was so crowded that men of the greatest physical powers had been scarcely audible. Yet such was the magic of his voice, and the grace of his

[1] See *Life of William Wilberforce*, by his sons, vol. i. p. 53.

"expression, that by his very first sentence he arrested, and for above an hour he continued to enchain, the attention of the surrounding multitude."

The Address was carried by a show of hands, though the division on it appeared to have been so very close an affair that there was considerable doubt about it; and almost whilst in the act of speaking, Wilberforce received a letter from Pitt announcing the dissolution of Parliament. The King and Pitt both thought that the time had come for a dissolution, and on the 25th March Parliament was dissolved, the King stating that he "appealed to the sense of the people."

"It is not every dissolution of Parliament that can with propriety be regarded as a direct and specific appeal from the Sovereign to his people." This one emphatically was.[1]

Years afterwards a critic in the *Edinburgh Review* regarded this fact as subversive of the principles of representative government, and condemned Pitt accordingly; but it is a practice regarded now as so much the opposite of being subversive of the Constitution, that it has become more and more common, and the tendency still further in that direction is one of the features of the present day. This dissolution is memorable further for the reason pointed out by Macaulay, that "No prince of the Hanoverian line had ever under any provocation ventured to appeal from the representative body to the constituent body"; and also as showing how fully aware Pitt was of the importance of public opinion, and how desirous he was to conciliate and secure its support.

Strange as it on the surface appears, that an alliance

[1] See *A History of the Political Life of William Pitt*, by John Gifford (1809), vol. i. p. 163.

should have been formed between a sovereign who was opposed to all popular reform, and a man who was one of the leaders and the spokesman of the party of reform, yet the fact was there, visible to all men. That Pitt should have been supporting the King, and Wilkes appealing to the electors of Middlesex to enable him to support Pitt, was indeed curious.[1] For once the cries of "King and Church," and "Reform and Economy," commingled.

While the dissolution was still impending, meetings were held in Westminster to prepare the way for the coming contest in that constituency. These meetings, we are told, were "a series of tumults and outrages unparalleled either for their grossness or continuance, which occasioned all sorts of violence, bloodshed, and murder." We get a graphic sketch of one of them, evidently not quite the worst. On the 14th March the public general meeting was held in Westminster Hall. Before twelve o'clock Sir C. Wray and his friends "took their station on the hustings erected in the hall. . . . Soon afterwards Mr. Fox and his friends mounted the hustings, which was crowded to excess. A disgraceful scuffle immediately ensued, and the chair was broken to pieces. The utmost confusion was produced in the hall. The hustings were nearly destroyed, and the limbs and lives of many were endangered. After a contention, which lasted nearly an hour, Mr. Fox and his friends retired." Fox then proceeded to address "a multitude in Palace Yard from a window of the King's Arms Tavern, whence, having been drawn by the populace to Devonshire House, Piccadilly, a second meeting was held."

[1] See "Wilkes's Address to the Electors of Middlesex," in *The Public Advertiser*, April 1784.

Macaulay has given a very lucid explanation of the feelings of the electors and of those in whose hands the electors were the pawns.[1]

By the Coalition between North, the recognised head of the Tory party, and Fox, the idol of the Whig party, both offended their most zealous supporters.

"Squires and rectors who had inherited the principles of the cavaliers of the preceding century, could not forgive their old leader (North) for combining with disloyal subjects in order to put a force on the Sovereign. The members of the Bill of Rights Society, and of the Reform Associations, were enraged by learning that their favourite orator now called the great champion of tyranny and corruption his noble friend. Two great multitudes were at once left without any head, and both at once turned their eyes on Pitt. One party saw in him the only man who could rescue the King, the other saw in him the only man who could purify the Parliament."

Quite early in the elections was it evident to which side victory would go.

On 6th April we learn from *The St. James's Chronicle*: "Some gentlemen are already thrown out, of the most unexceptional characters and fortunes, merely because they were friends of the Coalition; and in a great number of places there are oppositions on that one principle which shows the wisdom of the Ministry to taking the sense of the people."

"Now rose the war-cry of the hustings throughout England," wrote Lord Stanhope. "Almost everywhere Fox's banner was unfurled, and almost everywhere struck down." One hundred and sixty of the Coalition lost their seats, and were known by the name of "Fox's martyrs."[2]

[1] See his *Essay on Pitt*, p. 372. [2] *Life of Pitt*, by Lord Stanhope, vol. i. p. 204.

"So strong," wrote Wraxall, "was the general enthusiasm, that neither high birth, nor extended property, nor long Parliamentary services, nor talents, however eminent, could always secure a seat, unless sustained by opinions favourable to the Administration." [1] The King was overjoyed; the results were "on the whole more favourable than even the most zealous expected." [2]

It was a great occasion for the Platform. Never yet had there been so many contests at a general election, and every contest implied to some extent, large or small, the use of the Platform. Eight counties were contested in England, and one in Wales, and no less than 65 boroughs—a total of 74 contests.

Fox stood for Westminster, "the greatest and most enlightened as it was then considered of all the represented boroughs of England." "The poll continued open from the 1st of April to the 17th of May." [3] During this time every nerve was strained on either side. "At the hustings at Covent Garden, hour after hour, the orators strove to out-argue and the mobs to out-bawl each other. All day long the open space in front resounded with alternate clamours, while the walls were white with placards, and the newspapers teeming with lampoons. Taverns and public-houses were thrown open at vast expense. Troops of infuriated partisans, decked with party ribbons, and flushed with gin and wine, were wont to have fierce conflicts in the streets, often with severe injuries inflicted, and in one instance even with loss of life." [4]

Pitt himself stood for the University of Cambridge

[1] *Memoirs of Sir N. W. Wraxall*, vol. iii. p. 339.

[2] The King to Mr. Rose, 4th April 1784.—See *Diaries and Correspondence of the Right Hon. G. Rose*, vol. i. p. 62.

[3] Stanhope's *Pitt*, vol. i. p. 208.

[4] See also *History of the Westminster Election of* 1784.

—"rather unexplored ground at present," he wrote to the Duke of Rutland, "but I am sanguine in my expectations."[1] He was successful after a keen contest. "That learned body," wrote Wraxall,[2] "conscious that the spirit of distributing prebends and bishoprics had been transferred from the Coalition, placed him at the head of the poll."

No speech was delivered by him there. In Oxford University there was a regulation that no candidate for Parliamentary election should approach within ten miles of the jurisdiction of the University during the time of an election.[3] A somewhat similar regulation existed at Cambridge University, though not quite so strict apparently, for Pitt was there and canvassed; that is recorded.[4]

As regards the use of the Platform throughout the country at this election, the Press of the time gives little information. In none of the metropolitan newspapers is there scarcely more than a reference to any speech at any of the elections, except in the metropolis and its immediate neighbourhood. Still there is sufficient to enable us to draw the general conclusion that candidates were obliged, in larger or more open constituencies, to have recourse to the Platform, or the "Hustings," as it was then called; but they attributed little importance to any results to be gained from it, and we conclude that the Press did not consider what was said from it as of much consequence.

It is of course to be borne in mind that owing to the slowness of communication in those days, no speech could have had any wider effect than upon those to

[1] See *Correspondence between the Right Hon. Wm. Pitt and the Duke of Rutland.* London, 1842.

[2] *Memoirs*, vol. iii. (1884 ed.), p. 340.

[3] See Oldfield's *History of the Boroughs, etc.*, vol. ii. p. 387.

[4] See London papers of the time.

whom it was addressed; but the real explanation of the comparative unimportance of the Platform was that the actual government of the country was securely fixed in the hands of the King and Parliament; and further, that in those days politicians thought only of their Parliamentary reputation.

The history of the country at this period is written in accounts of personal changes, of the composition of successive Cabinets, of the Parliamentary intrigues, and of the individual opinions or schemes of this or that politician. It is far more a personal history than a public history. The personality of a public man overshadows completely the importance of the measures advocated or opposed by him in Parliament. The intrigues, quarrels, coalitions, separations of the statesmen of the day, figure to the exclusion of the advantages or disadvantages of the measure discussed, or its effect on the general public. Reputation sprang from distinction in Parliamentary debate and management and not from any efforts outside the House. Brilliant orators many of the most prominent men were, genuine lovers of their country, but Parliament was the arena of conflict, and Parliamentary laurels the crown of victory.

It is desirable to dwell on these facts in connection with the most important general election of the century, for, as has been truly pointed out, "the General Election of 1784 determined for more than forty years the question of the government of England."[1]

It would, however, be taking but a partial view of the "Platform" at election time, if whilst acknowledging that as a political power it was held in more or less contempt by statesmen and politicians, we were to shut our eyes to the fact that every electoral contest

[1] Russell's *Fox*, vol. ii. p. 247.

familiarised it more and more to the people. The more the demand came from them for addresses and speeches from the Platform, the more would it have to be met; and as a general election was the one occasion within every six or seven years when they enjoyed the semblance of political power, they were disposed to make ever more and more of it. The speechifying, though scarcely likely of itself to influence votes, was part of the entertainment; and where the constituency was at all a large one, was a necessary part. Indeed, if we take the Westminster election or Southwark or London city or Middlesex elections as examples, we find an amount of speechifying as great almost as the present times can show; and the fact that this election of 1784 was a direct appeal to the people on a specific subject awoke far greater interest in the elections than had ever before been occasioned. They once over, and Pitt firmly seated in power, still a Whig, and still the advocate of Parliamentary reform, a lull naturally ensued in popular agitation.

Wraxall, in his *Memoirs*, has described the effect of the elections. He wrote:[1] "After witnessing the formation and extinction of three Administrations within the space of little more than twenty months, George III. beheld in prospect domestic tranquillity, personal freedom, and national prosperity. . . . All the errors and misfortunes of his reign seemed to be swallowed up and forgotten in the grave of the Coalition . . . the accumulated evils of three and twenty years disappeared at once, and were obliterated. Only the virtues of the Sovereign seemed to survive in the memory of his people. The same prince who, in March 1782, laboured under a load of

[1] Russell's *Fox*, vol. iii. pp. 331, 332.

prejudice and unpopularity, was considered in March 1784 as the guardian of the Constitution, worthy the warmest testimonies of affection, gratitude, and respect. They poured in upon him from all quarters, acknowledging the blessings of his paternal government, and approving the recent interference of his prerogative for the destruction of an unprincipled faction. . . . A new order of events, and a new era seemed to commence from this auspicious date."

It was under these new circumstances and as Prime Minister in a new House of Commons that Pitt once more brought forward the question of Parliamentary reform. His present proposal showed a considerable advance on his former ideas. A certain number of boroughs, about thirty-six, should, he said, be disfranchised on their voluntary application to Parliament, when they should receive an adequate consideration, and their seats be transferred to the counties. A few large towns should be enfranchised, and in the counties the franchise should be given to copyholders.[1]

"It was a new and interesting object," said Mr. Duncombe, "to see the Minister of the Crown standing forth in this zealous and patriotic manner as the advocate of the people."

But the result was no more successful than those which had gone before.

"Had the people of England called for a reform?" was scornfully asked. "There were but eight petitions on the table." "There are no petitions against it," was the reply; "the best proof that the opinion of the nation at large was for a reform." But 248 voted against Pitt's proposal, and 174 for it, and the cause sustained a crushing reverse.

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxv. p. 432.

One cannot help feeling, someway or other, that the attempt on Pitt's part was more or less half-hearted, or done only in fulfilment of an obligation which he knew was hopeless of attainment, and that if he had really meant to carry his scheme, or some measure of reform, complete master as he was of the situation at the time, he might have made a better fight for it.

His failure, however, to carry his proposals convinced most men that the prospects of Parliamentary reform were for the time at least hopeless; and as the people still looked upon him as a Minister whose sympathies were on their side, they were for the time content to leave it so.

One incident in the following year (1785), as bearing on the Platform, should be recorded before we pass on. Horace Walpole tells us that in September 1785 Fox, Lord Derby, and others of that party, visited Manchester, and had a great reception for their opposition to the new taxes and Irish proposition.[1]

Fox gives a short account of the visit himself.

"Our reception at Manchester was the finest thing imaginable, and handsome in all respects. All the principal people came out to meet us, and attended us into the town, with blue and buff cockades, and a procession as fine, and not unlike that upon my chairing at Westminster. We dined with 150 people, and Mr. Walker gave me as a toast."

He gives no account of his own speech, does not even mention that he spoke—though of course he did—but the event is interesting as an early example of what later became a common practice, and an important branch of the Platform,—a political dinner to ex-Ministers, with, I think we may presume, speeches.

[1] See Lord Russell's *Fox*, vol. ii. p. 270.

CHAPTER V

THE LEGAL POSITION OF THE PLATFORM

BEFORE entering on the troublous times when the great drama of the French Revolution was enacted, and when in this country effort after effort was made to suppress free speech and public discussion, it is desirable to ascertain as clearly as we now can the position in which this new political engine, the Platform, stood at this time in its relation to the existing laws of the country.

The inquiry falls under three heads.

The first is, how far were public meetings permitted by the law? the second, what sort of meetings were considered legal? and the third, how far was speech free at public meetings?

Now, as regards the first, it appears to have been very prevalently believed, though whence the belief originated it is impossible to say, that no meeting could be held without its having been convoked by the Lord Lieutenant, or the Sheriff of the county. Probably the idea arose from the fact that almost the only meetings with which people were familiar, namely, the meetings for the election of members of Parliament, were thus convened, and when the needs of a developing political and social life created the demand for public meetings

for other purposes, it may have been thought necessary to follow the precedent already in existence.

Such convocation or form of procedure, however, was not required by any statute, or even by common law.

"The Courts never went the length of laying down a positive rule of law that a public meeting could not be held without the licence of some public functionary,"[1] but they certainly were very much opposed to such an innovation, as likewise were Parliament, and most of the authorities in those times.

The idea of holding a meeting without the sanction of the Sheriff, or the Lord Lieutenant of the county, was one of those new-fangled popular ideas which required repression. It was an invasion of the prerogatives of authority; it was the assertion of an independence which was not to be encouraged; it was an attempt on the part of the people to set themselves up as somebodies, to revolt from their proper position of vassalage. Often, therefore, do we find the High Sheriffs refusing to convene meetings when asked to do so by those whom they did not consider of sufficient position or importance to justify such a request, or more commonly when the object of the meeting was not such as commended itself to them.

The Sheriffs appear to have been of opinion that their decision was necessary, and should have been submitted to as final.

But the time was coming, had indeed come, when the people could no longer be expected to be dependent for the expression of their opinions on the favour or disfavour of a High Sheriff or Lord Lieutenant. Men were growing up whose views differed somewhat from

[1] See *Liberty of the Press, Speech, and Public Worship*, by James Paterson, M.A., p. 19.

the stereotyped and not unbiassed views of these important functionaries; and, at any rate, the attempt to ascertain whether these officials were to be an everlasting bar absolute to the expression of the public voice was worth making.

A test case occurred in 1780, just when the "Economy agitation" was in full swing. In several counties, as has already been stated, the Sheriffs had refused to call a public meeting, though requested to do so, alleging some feeble or disingenuous excuse, such as that the application to them was not sufficiently numerously signed to justify them in complying, or that they were leaving office immediately, and could not bind their successor, or any other makeshift.

In Sussex the Duke of Richmond, and several of the nobility, gentry, and freeholders, applied to the High Sheriff to call a meeting. The High Sheriff replied that he did not think the requisition numerously enough signed. The Duke, however, then a strong reformer, and not to be put off with what, though an excuse, was not a reason, determined on calling a meeting on his own responsibility; and in inviting the people to attend, he wrote: "I conceive that, however usual it has been, the name of the High Sheriff, or Lord Lieutenant is by no means necessary to convene the county; that the request of any gentleman of property and character is of equal authority; and that the people have a right to assemble themselves, and deliberate on public affairs whenever they think proper."

As already narrated, the meeting was held; it was numerously attended, a Petition was adopted, and those present determined on giving every support in their power to the proposed action of the Yorkshire and other petitioners. No legal proceedings were taken

against them for thus assembling, nor could any have been taken. The right of the people to meet without being convened through an official medium was thus established.

Then there was another idea rather prevalent at the time, which was also, as far as possible, enforced, with the view of checking the practice of attending public meetings, and of limiting the numbers—the idea that none but freeholders had a right to attend. This was an ingenious theory, as the number of freeholders was comparatively small, and if meetings were limited to them, part of the mischief of public meetings would have been obviated. But the question was formally raised in Cornwall. "Here," Oldfield tells us,[1] "and in most other shires, when county meetings have been held to petition Parliament for redress of any grievance, it has been customary for the Sheriff to summon only the freeholders, as if every other description of persons, because they are deprived of the right of voting, should be deprived of the right of petitioning also. The independent gentlemen of this county, however, signed a requisition to the Sheriff to summon all the householders, as well as the freeholders, to the last county meeting. The Sheriff refusing to comply with their request, a number of gentlemen took the opinion of eminent counsel on the legality of the proceeding, and called a meeting of all the inhabitants of the county, which was accordingly held at Bodmyn, and the business was conducted in the same manner as if the Sheriff had called them together—thus establishing the legality as well as the right of the people to meet upon all occasions, where they feel a public grievance."

[1] See his *History of Representation*, vol. iii. p. 135. He does not give the date of the meeting, but it was probably early in this century.

So far, then, as the power of holding meetings was concerned, it would appear that so long as a meeting was not convened for any purpose which would make it an illegal meeting, public meetings could be held even without the sanction of the Lord Lieutenant, or High Sheriff of the county, but that it required some persons of property or influence in the county to convene the meeting. That meetings of the common folk should be held without such convocation, or merely on their own motion, appears to have been, as yet, unthought of.

The second head of inquiry is, What sort of meetings were considered legal? This can best be ascertained by stating what sort of meetings were considered illegal.

"Illegal meetings" have been the subject of numerous definitions by the greatest judges of England, and at the time now under consideration the law does not appear to have been much different from what it is at present. Broadly speaking, any meeting might be considered illegal which tended to cause a breach of the peace. So far back as the reigns of Edward II., Richard III., Henry IV., and Henry V., Acts had been passed against unlawful assemblies, "so that,"[1] as Blackstone remarked, "our ancient law, previous to the modern Riot Act, seems pretty well to have guarded against any violent breach of the public peace; especially as any riotous assembly on a public or general account, as to redress grievances, and also the resisting the King's forces if sent to keep the peace, may amount to overt acts of high treason, by levying war against the King."

Lord Chief-Justice Holt had also defined the law. He said: "If persons do assemble themselves and act with force in opposition to some law which they think incon-

[1] Blackstone's *Commentaries.*

"venient, and hope thereby to get it repealed, that is a levying war and treason."

The meetings for the election of a Member of Parliament were legal, and a special amount of latitude has always been allowed to the persons participating in them, not merely as regarded language, but also as regarded actions.

Meetings for the purpose of petitioning the King or Parliament were also, as has already been stated, legal, but under somewhat more jealous restrictions than meetings for elections.

The law was thus laid down in 1781 by Lord Loughborough, afterwards Lord Chancellor, at the trials of some of the rioters in the Gordon riots.[1] He said: "To petition for the passing or repeal of any Act is the undoubted inherent birthright of every British subject; but under the name and colour of petitioning, to assume command, and to dictate to the Legislature, is the annihilation of all order and government. Fatal experience has shown the mischief of tumultuous petitioning, in the course of that contest in the reign of Charles I., which ended in the overthrow of the monarchy, and the destruction of the Constitution; and one of the first laws, after the restoration of legal government, was a Statute passed in the thirteenth year of Charles II., cap. 5, enacting that no petition to the King or either House of Parliament for alteration of matters established by law in Church or State (unless the matter thereof be approved by three Justices or the Grand Jury of the county) shall be signed by more than twenty names, or delivered by more than ten persons."

And at the end of Lord George Gordon's trial,[2] Lord Mansfield reiterated and endorsed the opinion

[1] See *State Trials*, vol. xxi. p. 487. [2] *Ibid.* p. 646.

that this Act was still in full force. "But, it is said, that law is repealed by the Bill of Rights. I speak the joint opinion of us all, that the Act of Charles II. is in full force; there is not the colour for a doubt. The Bill of Rights does not mean to meddle with it at all; it asserts the right of the subject to petition the King, and that there ought to be no commitments for such petitioning. But neither the Bill of Rights, nor any other Statute, repeals this Act of Charles II."

This Act, however, appears to have been totally ignored in both the Middlesex Election Agitation and the Economy Agitation, so far at least as the number of signatures to petitions was concerned, and as years went on, it fell into complete desuetude, though on one notable occasion its provisions were appealed to.[1]

The Riot Act which was passed in 1714 (George I. cap. 5) did not define an illegal meeting, but gave a very summary process of dispersing it, for it enacted "that if any twelve persons are unlawfully assembled to the disturbance of the peace," any one magistrate might order them to disperse, and if they did not do so within an hour, they rendered themselves liable to a penalty on a conviction of death, as in a case of felony, without benefit of clergy.

The real state of the case was, that the question whether a meeting was illegal or not, was, ultimately, one for a jury to determine. But up to the period with which we are now dealing, little difficulty had arisen as to the legality or illegality of a meeting.

Except absolutely riotous meetings, or proceedings, such as took place in the case of a strike for increase of wages, or for food, and the orderly peaceable meetings

[1] In the Police Commissioners' Notice about the Chartist meeting at Kennington Common in 1848, see *post*, chapter xix.

which have been described in connection with the Middlesex election agitation, and the agitation for economic reform, there were up to this period no others. The class of meetings which began soon after the date of the French Revolution were still completely absent from English political life.

To pass on to the third head of our inquiry, it is to be remarked that an even more intricate and difficult question than the legality or illegality of public meetings is the legality or illegality of the language used at such meetings, and that even more immediately concerns the Platform than the other two.

The subject is one which will have to be referred to again and again in the course of this work, and it can only be treated here in its incipient stage.

That the tendency to public speech and comment on public affairs was increasing was manifest enough. Seldom if ever has the necessity for discussion, or one might say the inevitability of discussion been more eloquently and forcibly put than it was by Lord Chief-Justice Eyre in his charge to the Grand Jury at Hardy's trial in 1794.[1] He said: "All men may, nay, all men must, if they possess the faculty of thinking, reason upon everything which sufficiently interests them to become objects of their attention; and among the objects of the attention of free men, the principles of government, the constitution of particular governments, and above all, the constitution of the government under which they live, will naturally engage attention, and provoke speculation. The power of communication of thoughts and opinions is the gift of God, and the freedom of it is the source of all science, the first-fruits and the ultimate happiness of society; and, therefore, it seems to follow that human

[1] See *State Trials*, vol. xxiv. p. 205.

laws ought not to interpose, nay, cannot interpose, to prevent the communication of sentiments and opinions in voluntary assemblies of men. All which is true, with this single reservation, that those assemblies are to be so composed, and so conducted, as not to endanger the public peace and good order of the Government under which they live."

Human laws, however, did interpose, and very effectually too, and it required at this time a certain audacity to make even claims to freedom of speech, much less to indulge in free speech itself.

Freedom of speech stood precisely on the same grounds as the freedom of the Press. As regarded it, Blackstone[1] said: "The liberty of the Press is indeed essential to the nature of a free State; but this consists in laying no *previous* restraints upon publications and not in freedom from censure for criminal matter when published."

And so, as regards the Platform, a man was at liberty to say what he liked—that, indeed, could scarcely be prevented—but he had to take the consequences of what he said, and was liable to legal proceedings against him if he said *anything* illegal.

But in another way he was under greater restrictions, for if he spoke at a meeting which was an illegal one, no matter how harmless or innocent his remarks, he was still liable to be legally proceeded against for attending an illegal meeting.

It was once said by Lord Thurlow,[2] "It was the glory of the English law that there was no previous restraint on the people in the exercise of the important privilege of meeting to discuss grievances and petition

[1] *Commentaries*, Book vi. chap. x.

[2] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxii. p. 541; 14th December 1795, House of Lords.

"Parliament respecting them. That privilege stood precisely on the same ground with the freedom of the Press. Its use was free and unrestrained, but its abuse was open to punishment;" but his dictum was a misleading one, for there was no definition of the word "abuse," and the Government interpreted the word just as it pleased.

As a matter of fact a public speaker could not exceed very narrow limits without laying himself open to legal penalties which it required the very bravest, or the most reckless, to face.

In the earlier times of our history any criticism on the Government or the Constitution were attended with risk.

Burgh, whose *Political Disquisitions* were published in 1774, protested that "No free subject ought to be under the least restraint in respect to accusing the greatest, so long as his accusation strikes only at the political conduct of the accused; his private we have no right to meddle with, but in so far as a known vicious private character indicates an unfitness for public power or trust."[1]

. . . . . .

"No man ought to be hindered saying or writing what he pleases on the conduct of those who undertake the management of national affairs, in which all are concerned, and therefore have a right to inquire and to publish their suspicions concerning them."[2]

. . . . . .

"It certainly is one of the most atrocious abuses that a free subject should be restrained in his inquiries into the conduct of those who undertake to manage his

[1] See *Political Disquisitions*, by T. Burgh, vol. iii. p. 250. [2] *Ibid.* p. 254.

affairs—I mean the administrators of government, for all such are undertakers, and are answerable for what they undertake; but if it be dangerous and penal to inquire into their conduct, the State may be ruined by their blunders or by their villainies beyond the possibility of redress." [1]

And his very protests show what the state of affairs was in this respect in his time. Men were under not merely restraint, but grievous restraint, in commenting on the political conduct of the Government; they were hindered from saying what they thought on the subject, and the "atrocious abuse" that a free subject should be restrained from criticising the administration of Government undoubtedly existed. Time after time, too, in later years do we find Erskine, the great legal defender of the victims of Government intolerance of free speech, reiterating the claim to freedom of speech as if it were necessary to assert it, so as to prevent its being lost altogether.

Again and again, on the other hand, shall we find the most extravagant ideas given expression to, even by some of the ablest men, against the people enjoying liberty of speech, and protest after protest against comment by the public on the affairs of Government.

It is hard now to realise how limited freedom of speech was, and how effective was the power of the Government to suppress it. The restrictions which were imposed on speakers may be classified under four heads, namely—blasphemy, immorality, defamation, and sedition. As it is only the political aspect of the Platform which concerns us at present, there is no need to refer in detail to any of these restrictions, except those which come under the head of sedition and defamation,

[1] Burgh's *Political Disquisitions*, p. 246.

for it was in these categories that any abuse of public speech relating to affairs of Church, State, or governing authorities, were brought.

Speaking broadly, the same laws which were used to keep the Press under subjection to the Government were also used to keep public speech within prescribed bounds. The control over both was the law of libel, and as the law on this subject was capable of being given a very wide interpretation by the Government, this control was most powerful and far-reaching.

There has ever been the greatest difficulty in defining a libel.

Sir Francis Burdett once somewhat vehemently said: "Libel is the easiest of all charges to be brought against any man; a man deaf and dumb, who can neither write nor read, may be guilty of libel; a sign-post is a libel; a scarecrow set up in a garden is a libel; motions of our hands and fingers are libels;"[1] but his views on the subject can scarcely be considered as judicial.

Blackstone, expressing the judicial view, wrote: "Every freeman has an undoubted right to lay what sentiments he pleases before the public; to forbid this is to destroy the liberty of the Press. But if he publishes what is improper, mischievous, or illegal, he must take the consequences of his own temerity."[2]

This is tolerably wide, but other definitions are not much narrower.

The Lord Chief Baron Comyns, in his digest of the English law, defined a libel to be "a contumely or reproach published to the defamation of the Government, of a magistrate, or of a private person," terms

[1] See *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxvi. p. 507, 1802.

[2] *Commentaries*, vol. iv. p. 151.

which practically included everything that could be construed into censure, therefore no censure of the Government or even of a public functionary was safe in England.[1]

Sir James Fitzjames Stephen,[2] in his great work on Criminal Law, thus deals with the subject: "What, in the latter part of the eighteenth century was the proper definition of a seditious libel? Omitting technicalities, I think it might at that time have been correctly defined as written censure upon public men for their conduct as such, or upon the laws, or upon the institutions of the country. This is the substance of Coke's case, *De libellis famosis*, which is the nearest approach to a definition of the crime with which I am acquainted. It was a definition on which the State Chamber acted invariably, and which was adopted after the Restoration by the Court of King's Bench. It is in harmony with the whole spirit of the period in which it originated. . . . It was in substance recognised and repeated far into the eighteenth century, and was never altered by any decision of the Courts, or any Act of Parliament. That the practical enforcement of this doctrine was wholly inconsistent with any serious public discussion of political affairs is obvious, and so long as it was recognised as the law of the land, all such discussion existed only on sufferance."

But there was a still more extraordinary part of the law of libel, namely that the truth of the statement made could not be pleaded as a defence.

If a man called a minister a swindler, and was able to adduce even the most incontrovertible proof that he really had swindled and was a swindler, the person

[1] See two very interesting articles in *The Edinburgh Review* on the "Liberty of the Press," May 1811, and September 1816.

[2] *A History of the Criminal Law of England*, by Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, vol. ii. p. 348.

making the statement would still have been liable to conviction and punishment.

In 1731, and between then and the time I am now writing of, the law had not been changed, the Lord Chief-Justice of the day, in dealing with a libel case, said: "As for your saying that you can prove what is charged on the defendant to be true, it is my opinion that it is not material whether the facts charged in a libel be true or false, if the prosecution is by indictment or information."[1]

Blackstone also says (vol. iv. p. 150): "It is immaterial with respect to the essence of a libel whether it is true or false, since the provocation, and not the falsity, is the thing to be punished criminally. . . . In a criminal prosecution, the tendency which all libels have to create animosities, and to disturb the public peace, is the whole that the law considers."

And then there was another check on criticising the governing authorities. The Lord Chief-Justice, in the case above referred to, also said: "The law always punishes libels, even among private persons, because they flow from malice, and tend to create disturbance, and disturb the public peace. And the law reckons it a greater offence when the libel is pointed at persons in a public capacity, as it is a reproach to the Government to have corrupt magistrates, etc., substituted by his Majesty, and tends to sow sedition and disturb the peace of the kingdom."

The vagueness of any definition of libel, however, would not have been so serious a matter had it been left to the judgment of a jury of twelve men to decide whether certain words were libellous or not; but at this time, and up to 1792, it was not the jury who decided whether the words were a libel, but the judge.

[1] *State Trials*, vol. xvii. pp. 658, 659.

Burke, in one of his usual eloquent speeches, has stated the case far better than it can otherwise be done. He said: "It is the very ancient privilege of the people of England that they shall be tried (except in the known exceptions) not by judges appointed by the Crown, but by their own fellow-subjects, and out of this principle the trial by juries has grown. There is one case in which, without directly contesting this principle, the whole substance, energy, and virtue of the privilege is taken out of it—that is, in the case of a trial by indictment or information for a libel. The doctrine in that case, laid down by several judges, amounts to this: that the jury have no competence where a libel is alleged, except to find the gross corporeal facts of the writing and the publication, together with the identity of the things and persons to which it refers; but that the intent and tendency of the work, in which intent and tendency the whole criminality consists, is the sole and exclusive province of the judge. Thus having reduced the jury to the cognisance of facts not in themselves presumptively criminal, but actions neutral and indifferent, the whole matter, in which the subject has any concern or interest, is taken out of the hands of the jury."[1]

In 1770 this subject was brought before both Houses of Parliament. Serjeant Glynn, who introduced it in the House of Commons, said:[2] "In the case of a libel, for example, the jury is only permitted to determine whether it was published by the culprit, and whether it is applicable to the person stated in the indictment or information. Whether he designed to do an injury or service, is declared totally immaterial to them. They must bring him in guilty. The malice or

[1] *Parliamentary History*, 1771, vol. xvii. p. 44.

[2] *Ibid.* vol. xvi. p. 1213 (6th December 1770).

"innocence must be left as a matter of future consideration to the judge, who must give each its due weight as an aggravation or extenuation according to the nature of the case."

The Solicitor-General Thurlow (afterwards Lord Chancellor) defended the practice on the ground that the jurors were not qualified to judge.

In the following year leave was moved for to bring in a Bill which proposed to enact that the jury should be held and reputed competent to all intents and purposes, in law and in right, to try every part of the matter laid or charged in an indictment (for a seditious libel) comprehending the criminal intention of the defendant, and the civil tendency of the libel charged, as well as the mere fact of the publication thereof, and its application.[1]

The change of the law was sought, not on account of the Platform, but on account of the Press; and it is an instructive fact that not one single reference is made in the course of the debate to a speech at a public meeting —a tolerably conclusive proof that, despite the Middlesex Election Agitation, the Platform had not, up to 1771, risen to such importance as to require any alteration of the law so far as it was concerned. The Bill, it need scarcely be said, was defeated by a large majority.

But it was not only in the wide-covering scope of the law of seditious libel that its terror lay, but also in the manner in which it could be enforced, and the penalties it entailed. The procedure by which the law was put in action was very summary. The alleged libeller might be put upon his trial by an "information" which the Attorney-General had *ex officio* a right to file of his own mere motion.

[1] *Parliamentary History*, 1771, vol. xvii. p. 43.

There was no exaggeration in the description given in 1770 in the House of Commons on this subject:[1] "The Attorney-General, of his own mere motion, or by the mandate of a Secretary of State, christens any paper by what name he pleases. He calls it an infamous, a seditious, or treasonable libel. After this arbitrary construction, this discretionary name, he files an information, and commences a prosecution, without hearing any evidence, without examining a single witness, without receiving any other affidavit, without making the least previous inquiry. Can anything savour more of tyranny and despotism?"

When an *ex officio* information was filed no oath was required; the Crown officer merely informed the Court that the defendant had published a certain libel, and this put him on his trial. The defendant, however, had no means of forcing on the trial, as the Crown officer might keep the prosecution hanging over his head for years, and then bring it on at any moment for trial. The defendant, moreover, was by this process put on his trial without the preliminary hearing of his case by a Grand Jury—not that that was much of a protection in those days. If the defendent was convicted of seditious libel the punishment was fine and imprisonment for two years, and the pillory, at least in England, for in Scotland, as will by and by appear, the judges imposed sentences of transportation. And if the person charged was acquitted, or never tried at all, he had to pay the costs himself, it being the maxim that the Crown neither received nor paid costs. It is evident from these remarks how enormous was the power of the Government to suppress or curtail public

[1] See Speech of Captain Phipps, *Parliamentary History*, 1770, vol. xvi. p. 1128.

discussion outside Parliament. The power of filing *ex officio* information was in itself a tremendous deterrent, and even if a jury afterwards refused to convict, still the heavy costs to which a person was subjected, and the harsh treatment, probably imprisonment, before trial, were in themselves very dreadful penalties.

There was, however, another still more terrible penalty which might be incurred by the use of violent words, and as Governments at this time were not unprone to strain the law to the utmost, and did not hesitate to put the widest interpretation on expressions used, the risk was not an inconsiderable one. This was the risk of incurring a charge of high treason, the penalty for which was the most ignominious death.

The same state of the law appears to have prevailed as regards high treason as it did in the case of seditious libels. Erskine, who must be admitted to be an authority on the subject, declared positively in 1791:[1] "As the law stood at present, if a writing were charged even as an overt act of high treason, the Court might convict the prisoner upon the mere proof of publication, withdrawing from the consideration of the jury the traitorous intention which, in the language of the statute, was the very essence of the crime"—a state of the law which had the result described by Fox, that "a man's liberty and life might depend, not on the verdict of twelve persons, but on four lawyers."[2]

This state of the law as regards libel continued till 1792. In 1791 Fox introduced a Bill giving the jury the decision of the whole case, whether the matter complained of was a libel or not, leaving only to the judge the power or right of giving his opinion and directions to the jury, as in other criminal cases. He

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxix. p. 580. [2] *Ibid.* p. 571.

said :[1] "There was much doubt whether any man could really freely discuss the actions of Government, in the way in which he apprehended it was the right of every man to discuss them, without a greater risk to his person and property than prudent men would choose to hazard." The Bill passed the Commons, but the Lords put it off till the next session, 1792, and then, after some hesitation, actually passed it.[2]

It would appear from this review that the power of the Government to suppress public speech was very great. So far as writings were concerned, they had used it, for the Attorney-General said: "In the course of the last thirty-one years there had not been more than seventy prosecutions for libels, out of which there had been about fifty convictions." (There is no reference to any but printed.) "The law officers of the Crown had not, generally considered, been persecutors of the Press."

It is true that so far the occasion had not arisen; nothing either during the Middlesex Election Agitation or the Economy Agitation having given an excuse for strong action against spoken words, independent of that concerned with the preparation of Petitions; whilst the element of force was so prominently employed in the case of the Gordon riots, that though their prime mover was prosecuted for high treason, his acts were the foundation of the charge against him more than his speeches.

We are, however, on the threshold of more stirring

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxix. p. 555.

[2] "The Libel Act (of 1792) must thus be regarded as having enlarged the old definition of a seditious libel by the addition of a reference to the specific intentions of the libeller—to the purpose for which he wrote. And a seditious libel might, since the passing of that Act, be defined (in general terms) as blame of public men, laws, or institutions, published with an illegal intention on the part of the publisher. This was in practice an improvement upon the old law."—Stephen's *History of the Criminal Law*, vol. ii. p. 359.

events, when the Platform was to reach a new strata of society; and it has been necessary to describe the state of the law, regardless whether it had been put into force or not. The claims for liberty of the Press were most eloquently summarised in Erskine's speech in defence of Thomas Paine,[1] who was tried about Easter 1792 on a charge of seditious libel; and as his words apply equally to claims for liberty of speech on the Platform, they can with advantage be quoted here:

"The proposition which I mean to maintain as the basis of the liberty of the Press, and without which it is an empty sound, is this: that every man, not intending to mislead, but seeking to enlighten others with what his own reason and conscience, however erroneously, have dictated to him as truth, may address himself to the universal reason of a whole nation, either upon the subject of Governments in general, or upon that of our own particular country; that he may analyse the principles of its constitution, point out its errors and defects, examine and publish its corruptions, warn his fellow-citizens against their ruinous consequences, and exert his whole faculties in pointing out the most advantageous changes in establishments which he considers to be radically defective, or sliding from their object by abuse. All this every subject of this country has a right to do if he contemplates only what he thinks would be for its advantage, and but seeks to change the public mind by the conviction which flows from reasonings dictated by conscience. Other liberties are held *under* Governments, but the liberty of opinion keeps Governments themselves in due subjection to their duties."

[1] Speeches of the Right Hon. Lord Erskine, collected by J. Ridgway (third edition), vol. i. p. 420.

CHAPTER VI

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION AGITATION

THE French Revolution, which in subsequent years was to afford to the popular cause throughout the civilised world the most powerful incentives to progress, had at first but a moderate effect on public opinion in England.

"When the origin and early progress of that Revolution was first known in Great Britain,"[1] wrote an almost contemporary author, "it is in the memory of every one that it gave satisfaction rather than occasioned alarm. The nation had often severely smarted, and was yet sore from the consequences of the intriguing and perfidious conduct of the French Court. It was gratifying to see our old and natural enemy humbled; and it was pleasing to reflect that a numerous and ingenious people were about to share the blessing of liberty. Such, I have reason to think, were the general sentiments of the nation.

"The papers most devoted to the Ministry even spoke with exultation of the progress of the first Assembly, and foresaw a more happy alliance between the two nations than had ever been established by treaties of peace, which were seldom more than the lucid intervals of mad ambition."

[1] *History of the Two Acts*, p. xxxv.

Indeed, soon after the Revolution had begun, a general election in Great Britain afforded (June, July, 1790) as much opportunity as elections then gave for a display of national or political feeling, but none was displayed, and the elections passed over with few contests and with little popular excitement. Only 6 counties were contested and 51 boroughs—a total of 57 as against 74 in 1784. "It was felt by the nation at large," wrote Lord Stanhope,[1] "that when Pitt had declared earlier in the session that 'we are adding daily to our strength, wealth, and prosperity,' he had uttered no vain or empty boast; and that our flourishing condition was in no small degree the work of his able hands. Under the impression of these feelings the triumphant Ministerial majority which the old elections had given was more than confirmed by the new."

But though political feeling was thus apparently inactive, a steady and increasingly rapid growth of political knowledge had been going on, and the people generally had been progressing in political intelligence and education. New classes were rising into importance, discerning ever more clearly their right to their share in the government of the country, and feeling the superiority of their claims over those of many who already had a share therein; men were weighing the system and practice of Government, and finding them wanting; they were examining the pretensions of the governing powers, and were finding most of them based on privilege and possession rather than on principle or justice; a spirit of searching inquiry had developed itself, rendering, on the one hand, ever more aggressive those who discovered the subterfuges behind which authority frequently sheltered itself; and, on the other,

[1] See *Life of William Pitt*, by Earl Stanhope, vol. ii. p. 52.

those more bitter whose privileges were, with ever-growing vigour, assailed.

In this intellectual and political progress the Platform had scarce been giving any help. There were no longer any large county gatherings, and the numerous political Societies or Associations which had sprung into being were on so small a scale that most of their work could be and was done by other means than the Platform. The Platform had, in fact, scarcely as yet suggested itself to them as the best means of furthering their objects. To practically the first of these Societies or Associations, "the Society of Rights" in Wilkes's time, reference has already been made. Though of short duration, it nevertheless had set a precedent to people anxious to move in political matters.

The County Associations of 1779-80, the Convention of Delegates of 1780, and the "Thatched House Tavern Association of 1782" had afforded further examples of the advantages of association for political purposes. The advantages were indeed manifest. A number of men bound together in association must of necessity be more powerful than individuals, acting separately and independently; and still more powerful is the association of bodies. United, they mutually assist each other; they can better propagate the idea for which they associated; they can pursue their object with greater energy, and persevere for a longer space of time, and they have far greater weight.

Thus, once the example had been set, and men found that association was possible under the law, they had recourse to it.[1]

Another society, under the title of "The Society for promoting Constitutional Information," had been formed

[1] Place MSS., p. 14, 27,808.

in 1780. Of this Society Sir Cecil Wray was the first president; the Earls of Effingham and Surrey, R. B. Sheridan, Alderman Sawbridge, Sir T. Sinclair, and several other Members of Parliament were members; Sir W. Jones, Dr. Jebb, many merchants, and a few very respectable people were also members. This Society did not, however, press the Platform into its service, but relied entirely for the furtherance of its object on the circulation of pamphlets, essays, and other forms of literature, recommending annual Parliaments, Universal Suffrage, and vote by ballot. By these means it diffused much political information throughout the country.

It did not, however, last long, for it was broken up on the Coalition of Lord North and Fox.

Other political societies also gradually came into being, most prominent among them being "the Revolution Society," or the Society for Commemorating the Revolution in Great Britain. It had been the habit of this Society to celebrate the anniversary of the Revolution of 1688 on the 4th of November by a banquet.

On the 4th November 1788, the centenary of the Revolution, this Society had a specially splendid commemorative banquet at the London Tavern, which "was on this occasion honoured with the company of one of his Majesty's principal Secretaries of State, and other persons high in office and in confidence at Court. Some 400 gentlemen were present.[1]

At the instigation of this Society similar commemorations were held in the principal towns and cities throughout the kingdom, men of all parties joining in celebrating the event. On the same evening the "Con-

[1] See *London Chronicle*, 4th-6th November 1788.

stitutional Club" had a banquet at Willis's rooms, some 1200 being present, Horne-Tooke among the number, and speaking.

Also a "numerous and respectable meeting" of the "Whig Club" was held, the Duke of Portland in the chair, and Sheridan among the speakers.

Thus, though the Platform was doing little, it was not quite in abeyance in these early years of Pitt's administration. Events, indeed, were occurring which tended towards making its presence familiar to the public. An attempt on the King's life evoked from all parts of the kingdom a large number of congratulatory addresses on his escape, many of which were adopted at meetings.

The debates on the Regency Bill, which the unfortunate illness of the King gave rise to, occasioned "a general expression of the public mind." A "great burst of loyalty" was heard on the King's recovery from his dangerous illness, and those expressions "were conveyed by public meetings of all ranks of men, whether in a corporate or individual relation."

And so was reached the threshold of that world-important event—the French Revolution—which was destined, amongst its many other consequences, to have a most powerful effect on the growth of the Platform in this kingdom.

It was impossible that the exciting events which were occurring in France could remain long without affecting at least a portion of the people of England. The very motto of the Revolution—Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity — must have impressed some. The iteration, and reiteration, of those theories of natural right which appeal so forcibly to many, must have influenced others. There were men in England too—

whole classes in fact—who had grievances to be redressed, and whose condition could be ameliorated by legislation.

Gathered in the large towns were large numbers of artisans, mechanics, and working-people, whose existence was practically ignored by the State. Hitherto this great and growing civic industrial population had been politically inert and lifeless. As yet the political movements which had agitated the country in parts had not concerned them, or been participated in by them. Both the Middlesex Election Agitation, and the Economy Agitation, had been confined almost wholly to the freeholders or electors. These men were neither one nor the other. But now they were beginning to feel the desire for some participation in the political privileges from which they had been so rigorously excluded ; they were beginning to think that they were entitled to have some voice in the laws which regulated their whole existence. The difference of national character was such as effectually to preclude the idea of Englishmen following the cruel and bloody precedent set them by France. But the French Revolution had this effect on them. It stimulated them into political action, and awakened among them the desire and the hope for such alterations in the system of government as would mitigate their distresses and ameliorate their condition.

The first society which was formed by them with this object, and the first to rise into prominence, was "the London Corresponding Society," and it merits special and particular attention as being the sign and token of absolutely the first political movement of the civic industrial population of England, now growing into consequence in the country, and which, in after years, was to take so large a share in the political

as well as in the industrial life of the nation. Its founder was Thomas Hardy.[1] Hardy has himself left us a full account of its formation. He thus described its origin:[2]

"The London Corresponding Society began in the latter end of 1791, in consequence of a conversation I had with a friend respecting the unequal representation of the people in Parliament. That conversation suggested the propriety of instituting a society with the view of ascertaining the opinion of the people on that question by corresponding with other societies that might be formed, having the same object in view. The idea was mentioned to another friend or two. At last a society was formed. Its first meeting was held on the 25th of January 1792, consisting of eight persons. . . . The first Address and Resolutions which the Society

[1] Hardy is described by Francis Place[1] as "a man of a demure cast of character, not however affectedly so, but in the utmost sincerity. He was modest and wholly free from pretence, mild, quiet, good, and brave. Every good man who knew him was his friend, and he may be said to have had no enemies."

Erskine also, in his speech in defence of Hardy, said: "I will show likewise his character to be religious, temperate, humane, and moderate, and his uniform conduct all that can belong to a good subject and an honest man."

As I have availed myself very largely, in certain chapters of this work, of the manuscripts of Francis Place, which are in the British Museum, I think it desirable here to say that I think they give the most authoritative and thoroughly trustworthy information on many abstruse matters relating to popular movements about which otherwise little information is available. Francis Place spent a long life in intimate relationship with the people whom he described; and he took an active part in most of the events he described. He was a leading member of the London Corresponding Society in 1792, and following years; and he has given most graphic descriptions of events and people as late as the Chartist Agitation in 1839. He displays much moderation and good sense in his writings, and his comments are frank, outspoken, and fearless. That he must have been discreet is evident from the fact that he at no time laid himself open to any action against him by the Government, whilst he appears to have enjoyed the fullest confidence of his associates. He even appears to have been consulted at times by members of the Government.

[1] Place MSS., 27,814, p. 9.

[2] See a letter published in *The Examiner*, 1816, p. 718. Thomas Hardy wrote this letter on the 5th November 1816.

"published were dated 2d April 1792. From that time the Society became known to the public. Societies were formed in different parts of England, Scotland, and Ireland, in quick succession for the same laudable object."

Hardy himself recognised clearly the difference of the movement he was inaugurating, and its predecessors.[1]

After mentioning the County Associations of 1780, he says:[2] "The lapse of ten years took place, when another class of reformers started up, unknown to those who preceded them. They were of the lower and middling class of society *called the people.* They dared to associate to demand a restitution of their long-lost rights. Those two classes of reformers being almost total strangers to each other, some of those who were strenuous for reform in 1782 scarcely knew those who were associated for a reform in 1792. Many of them were so dreadfully alarmed at the uncommon appearance of the reformers in 1792 that they fled for shelter under the all-protecting wings of the Crown."

Another important society at this period was the Society for Constitutional Information, which, for some time dormant, had been roused to energy again by the events in France, and was circulating many pamphlets and works of an extreme character; but it did not occupy anything like so powerful or conspicuous a position as the "London Corresponding Society." Differing considerably from these societies, both in moderation, and in the social position of its members, was one which was formed in London during the winter of 1791-92, called "The Society of the Friends of the People." It

[1] See Place MSS., 27,814, British Museum, containing an unpublished paper of Hardy's.

[2] Place MSS., 27,814, narrative by Thomas Hardy.

originated with the leading members of the Whig party —Lords Lauderdale, Dacre, and Kinnaird, and also Erskine, Whitbread, Tierney, Mackintosh, the Duke of Bedford, and Charles (afterwards Earl) Grey, and some hundred persons, of whom some twenty-five or so were members of Parliament. It was formed "not for the purpose of advocating revolutionary doctrines, but for that of supporting those constitutional reforms and changes which were needed for the removal of acknowledged anomalies and abuses in our institutions, and which, if effected, the Society believed, would afford the best security to the country against the designs of those who aimed at the subversion of the institutions themselves."[1]

Its objects were: "*First*, to restore the freedom of election, and a more equal representation of the people in Parliament; and *second*, to secure to the people a more frequent exercise of their right of electing their representatives."[2]

In May 1792 the Society issued a public declaration of their principles. "We profess not to entertain a wish 'that the great plans of public benefit which Mr. Paine has so powerfully recommended should be carried into effect;' nor to amuse our fellow-citizens with the magnificent promise of obtaining for them 'the Rights of the People in their full extent,' the indefinite language of delusion, which, by opening unbounded prospects of political adventure, tends to destroy that public opinion which is the support of all true Governments, and to excite a spirit of innovation of which no wisdom can foresee the effect, nor skill divert the

[1] See *Some Account of the Life and Opinions of Earl Grey*, by Lieutenant-General the Honourable C. Grey, p. 9.

[2] See *Parliamentary History*, 1792, vol. xxix. p. 1303.

"course. . . . We are convinced that the people bear a fixed attachment to the happy form of our government, and to the genuine principles of the Constitution. These we cherish as the objects of such attachment, not from any implicit reverence or habitual superstition, but as institutions best calculated to produce the happiness of man in civil society; and it is because we are convinced that abuses are undermining and corrupting them, that we have associated for the preservation of those principles. We wish to reform the Constitution, because we wish to preserve it."[1] . . .

These societies carried on most of their work by publications and correspondence; and beyond the speeches at their indoor meetings, which generally were very scantily attended, no effort to use the Platform was attempted.

As with the development of the revolution in France the actions of the revolutionists there became more violent and extreme, the excitement of the revolutionary movement seized with firmer hold upon some of the ignorant or more designing men in England. The "Constitutional Society," and "the London Corresponding Society," began at their meetings to pass resolutions reflecting upon the Government "in the most intemperate language," and to circulate works "which, if effectual, could only bring the Monarchy into discredit."

Other circumstances were rendering the Government less and less inclined to be forbearing. The Society for Constitutional Information voted an Address to the Society of Jacobins in Paris in terms of approbation and applause.[2]

[1] See Lord Grey's Speech in House of Lords in 1810, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xvii. p. 563.

[2] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxi. p. 476.

At last the flood of hostile and inciting literature flowed so strongly that the Government determined on taking measures to check it; and on the 21st May 1792 the King issued a Proclamation against "wicked and seditious writings, printed, published, and industriously dispersed,"[1] and the magistrates were charged to make diligent inquiry, to discover the authors and printers, and to carry the laws rigorously into execution against them.[2] It was the first turn of the screw, which a little later, when the Platform appeared, was to be extended to it, and crush it, temporarily, out of existence.

The Government were also irritated by the revival of the hateful demand for Parliamentary reform, especially as in April 1792,[3] after some few meetings of the "Society of Friends" had been held, Mr. Grey gave notice in Parliament of his intention to bring the question before the House in the next session. Pitt, without waiting a year to proclaim his views, at once declared his opposition to any concession in the way of reform; and Burke, henceforward to be numbered with the opponents of any popular measure, likewise avowed his hostility. So great a statesman as Pitt doubtless saw how vastly the introduction of a new element into the ranks of the applicants for reform strengthened the cause. The intrusion of the civic industrial population, small as was the beginning, boded contingencies of the utmost gravity to the then existing system of Government. Tainted too with the poisonous ideas of the French revolutionary passion, at this very time at white-heat, the first symptoms presented themselves in a peculiarly unpatriotic and repulsive manner; and so

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxix. p. 1476.

[2] Addresses, some emanating from meetings, were sent to the King on the issue of this Proclamation.

[3] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxix. p. 1300.

the Government had little difficulty in securing approval for a stern and determined opposition to the movement.

It is not a little curious that, though the Platform even then was the symbol of popular action, the Government themselves adopted, or sanctioned the adoption of measures, which tended to accustom some of the people of the country to the use of the Platform. At this period, in their anxiety to suppress every expression of opinion which did not quite coincide with their own, they sanctioned the formation of "loyal associations," whose object was to aid the civil authorities to bring to justice the authors and propagators of seditious doctrines, and particularly to check the circulation of "Mr. Paine's libels."

An association was formed, with one John Reeves at its head. "A flaming Address was issued by it against the popular societies. This Address, being supported by Government, and all their venal agents, alarmed the nation very much, for all the creatures of Government and their dependents were set to work to ring the alarm bell." Publicans were warned against allowing the Societies holding any meeting in their houses, and numerous prosecutions were instituted against vendors of what was deemed seditious literature.

"A monstrous number of committees of those bodies called associations for receiving information, anonymous letters, and carrying on prosecutions," quickly arose,[1] and it appears from the advertisements in the newspapers[2] that, in the course of the formation of these associations, public meetings, generally of parishes, were held.

The summer and autumn and winter of 1792 saw

[1] *State Trials*, vol. xxii. p. 936, Speech of Mr. Vaughan.

[2] See *The Public Advertiser*, 25th January 1793.

France plunging ever deeper and deeper into the abyss of revolutionary horrors—massacre following massacre, blood flowing in rivers, the fearful September massacres crowning all, when thousands were remorselessly butchered, neither age, sex, youth, beauty, nor innocence, being spared.[1] "That a shriek of inarticulate horror rose over this thing," says Carlyle, "not only from French aristocrats and moderates, but from all Europe, and has prolonged itself to the present day, was most natural and right."

With growing horror, and setting of the teeth for stern measures on the one side, and with increasing recklessness and audacity on the other, the autumn passed in England. On the 27th September the London Corresponding Society sent an Address to the National Convention in Paris. On the 9th of November—but a short time after the September massacres—the Society for Constitutional Information likewise sent one "full of panegyric on the French Revolution, and expressing the strongest wishes for its progress and success."

These were proceedings which could not be endured, and the Government increased its energies to meet and defeat the plans of the Societies, and to check the spread of the publications which were being used to excite the passions of the lower classes.

"So far from having been remiss in his duty," the Attorney-General said, "with regard to seditious publications, he had on his file 200 informations."

Thomas Paine was prosecuted for a seditious libel, and very justly punished (December 1792),[2] but other prosecutions were less judiciously selected, and were scarcely such as would be impressive.

[1] Some authorities state that at least 6000 persons were massacred.

[2] *State Trials*, vol. xxii. p. 357.

Thus John Frost was prosecuted for "idle, thoughtless words uttered over wine," as Erskine described them, which, however, the Government thought deserving of punishment. Frost had dined at a coffee-house (on 6th of November 1792), and in the course of conversation said, "with a loud voice," "I am for equality. I see no reason why any man should not be upon a footing with another. It is every man's birthright."

Some one asked him what he meant by equality, to which he answered, "Why, I mean no king! The Constitution of this country is a bad one." For this offence he was sentenced to six months' imprisonment and to stand in the pillory, and to give bail.

It was at this trial, which took place on 27th May 1793, that Erskine, who was counsel for the prisoner, asserted that "the whole system of Government, of which this case was no mean specimen, came upon the public with the suddenness of a clap of thunder, without one act to give it foundation, from the very moment that notice was given of a motion in Parliament to reform the representation of the people.

"Leave," he said, "but the *practical* corruptions, and they (the Government) are contented to wink at the speculations of theorists; but the moment the national attention was awakened to look to things in practice, and to seek to reform corruptions at home, from that moment, as at the ringing of a bell, the whole hive began to swarm, and every man in his turn has been stung."[1]

The reformers were not, however, deterred by the action of the Government. The agitation spread to Scotland, and—most memorable fact—the Platform was called into requisition there for the first time. Meetings

[1] *State Trials*, vol. xxii. p. 492.

were held—one at Kirkintilloch, and another at Miltoun —and then a step was taken which differed somewhat from ordinary meetings, but also entailed the use of the Platform. A number of persons, about 170, it was said, styling themselves a "General Convention of Delegates from the Societies of the Friends of the People" [1] throughout Scotland, assembled at Edinburgh on the 11th of December 1792 for the purpose of concerting measures for obtaining a redress of grievances, and for restoring the freedom of election, and an equal representation of the people in Parliament.

The Government, alarmed at the first symptoms of the Platform being adopted for political purposes by a totally new class of people, determined on, if possible, checking a continuance of the practice; and for participation in this Convention, and in the meetings at Kirkintilloch and Miltoun, one, Thomas Muir, a young advocate of high talents and attainments, was arrested and committed to prison. Other prosecutions were also commenced.

The career of the Revolution in France was all the time advancing to the climax, and on the 21st of January 1793 the French King was beheaded.

"A King dying by such violence appeals impressively to the imagination, as the like must do, and ought to do." [2]

The effect in England was great and instantaneous. The Whig party was rent in twain, and some of the most distinguished members of the Opposition, horrified by what was occurring in France, and disgusted with the way in which some of the lower orders in their own

[1] These Societies of Friends of the People had no connection whatever with the Society of Friends of the People referred to at page 194.

[2] Carlyle.

country were coquetting with the French revolutionists, gave their full support to the Government, forsaking the Liberal cause, which, for so many years, they had led.

It was a great blow to the popular cause, but a still greater soon ensued.

On the 11th of February 1793 it was announced to Parliament that France had declared war against England. The war spirit in England was kindled, and with it, not alone did every prospect disappear of any extension of popular liberties, but those which existed were ruthlessly and summarily curtailed.

Undeterred by the hopeless prospect of success, and the known opposition of the Prime Minister, Mr. Grey persevered in his intention of moving for Parliamentary reform.

The Societies had been active in this direction in the meanwhile. Early in 1793 the joint efforts of the "Constitutional Information Society," and the "London Corresponding Society," seem to have been directed to the ostensible purpose of obtaining Petitions to the House of Commons "in favour of Parliamentary reform, and against the continuance of the war."[1]

A letter from the Corresponding Society to their friends in Sheffield, written at this time, throws a good deal of light on the views of the Society on the subject of petitioning. The Society wrote, 4th March 1793: "With regard to petitioning Parliament, we are unanimously of opinion that such a Petition will not produce a reform, yet from many considerations we are now persuaded, that if every Society in the island will send forward a Petition, we shall ultimately gain ground, forasmuch as it will force the members of the Senate repeatedly to discuss the subject, and their deliberations

[1] See Report of Secret Committee, *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxi. p. 722.

printed in the different newspapers will most naturally awaken the public mind towards the object of our pursuit. The nation once informed that a reform in Parliament is sought for in different quarters, gives rise to debates in the House of Commons (and is acknowledged in every rank to be wanting) will begin to exercise their own reasons on the subject.

"Arrived at that period, we presume our business will be nearly accomplished."

It was on the 6th of May 1793 that Grey brought forward his motion for Parliamentary reform. Petitions on the subject had already been presented. A few days previously one from Sheffield had been presented, probably the one written for, and though there was nothing in it which appears now to us at all censurable, Mr. Secretary Dundas declared it to be "highly indecent and disrespectful,"[1] and the House of Commons refused to receive it.[2] On the 6th several other Petitions were presented from different places, and then one from "the Society of the Friends of the People,"—the text on which many a Platform oration was delivered in later years. That Petition was made the ground for Grey's motion that it, and the others, should be referred to a Committee of the House for consideration.

It was the result of much careful investigation, by very able men; its information may be regarded as the most reliable that could be obtained on the subject, and its statements may be accepted with full confidence as to their accuracy.

As so much turned on the question of Parliamentary reform, the Societies and Associations justifying all their actions, meetings, and speeches by the need for it, and the Government policy being to

[1] See *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxx. p. 784. [2] 108 against; 29 for.

a very great extent guided, if not instigated, by their hostility to it, a brief *resumé* of the case stated by the petitioners must be given. In subsequent years, moreover, the subject so engrossed the Platform that it is well, at the outset, to have a clear account of the state of popular representation. This is given in the Petition of "the Society of the Friends of the People,"[1] which stated:

"That at the present day the House of Commons does not fully and fairly represent the people of England. . . . That the number of representatives assigned to the different counties is grossly disproportioned to their comparative extent, population, and trade. That the majority of your Honourable House is elected by less than 15,000 electors, which, even if the male adults in the kingdom be estimated at so low a number as 3,000,000, is not more than the two-hundredth part of the people to be represented. Is it fitting that Rutland and Yorkshire should bear an equal rank in the scale of county representation? Seventy members are returned by 35 places, 'in which it would be to trifle with the patience of your Honourable House to mention any number of votes whatever,'—the elections at the places alluded to being notoriously a mere matter of form.

"90 members are returned by 46 places, in none of which the number of voters exceeds 50.

"37 members are returned by 19 places, in none of which the number of voters exceeds 100.

"52 members are returned by 26 places, in none of which the number of voters exceeds 200."

All which the petitioners expressed themselves "ready to prove."

. . . . . .

[1] See *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxx. p. 788.

"Religious opinions create an incapacity to vote. All Papists are excluded generally, and, by the operation of the test laws, Protestant dissenters are deprived of a voice in the election of representatives in about 30 boroughs.

"A man possessed of £1000 a year, arising from copyhold or leasehold for 99 years, trade, or public funds, is not thereby entitled to a vote. A man paying taxes to any amount, how great soever, for his domestic establishment does not thereby obtain a right to vote, unless resident in certain boroughs.

"Eighty-four individuals, by their own immediate authority, send 157 members to Parliament. In addition to these, 150 members more are returned, not by the collected voice of those whom they appear to represent, but by the recommendation of 70 powerful individuals, and thus 154 patrons returned 307 members, or a decided majority of the whole House."

The Society might have added one more sentence to elucidate the tremendous import of these facts: "Thus the whole government of the country is in the hands of 154 persons."

It was a fearful exposure of the mockery of Parliamentary representation.

Grey said: "Nothing could tend so much in all probability to deliver this country from the present dreadful evils as to have a pure and uncorrupted House of Commons, emanating freely and fairly from the people."[1]

He described the additional influence the Crown had obtained since the Revolution: "Had not the patronage of the Peers increased? Was not the patronage of India now vested in the Crown? Were all these innovations

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxx. p. 799.

"to be made in order to increase the influence of the executive power, and was nothing to be done in favour of the popular part of the Constitution to act as a counterpoise? The introduction of 45 members to represent Scotland had also strengthened the hands of the Crown. It may be said, however, that the House of Commons are really a just representation of the people, because on great emergencies they never fail to speak the sense of the people, as was the case in the American war and in the Russian armament. But had the House of Commons been a real representation of the people, they would have interfered sooner on these occasions, without the necessity of being called upon to do so."

Well might the Government and the borough owners have been alarmed by the publication of such damaging facts as these, had it not been that, secure in their own power, they were able to laugh their opponents to scorn. Heavier ordnance would have to be brought to bear on them before they would be dislodged.

Jenkinson complained "That the time, the mode in which this question had been introduced, were highly objectionable. It had been introduced at a time when our Constitution had been threatened from within, and when war had been declared against it from without."[1]

As, somewhat later, for the long period of seventeen years, he was to be Prime Minister of England, and the persistent foe of reform, the views he now expressed are of some special interest, deliciously, even comically, inverted as they were.

"The question," he said, "should be examined by inquiring what was the end that was to be produced;

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxx. p. 810.

and then considering what were the means likely to produce that end. The end was a House of Commons that was to produce certain effects. The means of obtaining that House of Commons were the electors. We ought not then to begin first by considering who ought to be the electors, and then who ought to be the elected; but we ought to begin by considering who ought to be the elected, and then constitute such persons electors as would be likely to produce the best elected. He thought the landed interest, which was the stamina of the country, ought to have the preponderant weight, the manufacturing and commercial interest the next place, and then those whom he styled 'the professional people.' The counties and many of the populous boroughs were required for the return of country gentlemen. . . . The commercial towns secured the election of certain persons in that line, and the close boroughs for the election of the professional people. The first quality of the House of Commons is that of being a deliberative assembly. If public opinion is necessarily to affect their decisions on every occasion, it will cease to be that deliberative assembly, and members of it will have nothing to do but go to their constituents, and desire to be directed by them in the votes they are to give on every important subject. Public opinion, then, ought to have a certain weight in the conduct of that House, but public opinion ought never to have so great a weight as to prevent their exercising their deliberative functions."

One reads the earlier sentences of such a speech as this with astonishment that the man who delivered them could ever have risen to eminence in the State; with instruction, as a landmark showing how far the Platform has brought us from ideas or theories such as were here enunciated.

Pitt once more thundered against the dangers of reform.

"Last session the subject had been brought forward, I then considered the agitation of the question as capable of producing much mischief, and likely to be attended with no good. The scene of horrors which a neighbouring kingdom then presented exceeded imagination far short of what has since occurred. I perceived forming within the bosom of the (this) country a small but not contemptible party, who aspired at something more than a moderate reform, whose object, indeed, was nothing less than to introduce here those French principles which, from their consequences, I could not regard but with horror. I saw, therefore, that while none of that good of which moderate reform might be productive was to be obtained, much danger might be incurred, and an opening afforded to wicked persons to subvert the Constitution. . . .

"I thus found the probability of good but little, while the mischief was of a size so gigantic as to exceed calculation. . . . I would rather forego for ever the advantages of reform than risk for a moment the existence of the British Constitution."[1]

He said that there was every reason to suspect that the Petitions were the work of a few individuals, and therefore should have no weight with the House. . . . "I am sensible that ninety-nine out of a hundred of the people of England are sensible of the security which they enjoy for these blessings (order, justice, humanity, and religion), from the frame of our excellent Constitution, and so far from wishing to touch it with an innovating hand, are prepared to defend it against every attack."

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxx. p. 890.

The motion was rejected by a large majority—by 282 against 41—and Parliamentary reform received a blow from which it did not recover for many years to come.

Pitt, from the fact of his having changed his opinions on the question, had to bear the brunt of the storm raised by the reformers.

"The disgraceful triumph of that night will long be remembered by those who were indignant spectators of it. A Minister reprobating Associations, and condemning any mode of collecting the opinion of the people for the purpose of influencing the House of Commons. *He*, who commenced his career by being an associator, and who avowedly placed all his hopes of success in the authority which general opinion was to have over the House of Commons. *He*, who continued a Minister in defiance of the House of Commons, because he supposed himself to possess the confidence of the people. *He*, who gave the first example of legitimising and embodying the opinion of the people against the voice of their representatives. *He* was the Minister who adopted this language."[1]

After this crushing defeat Grey himself despaired.

A year later he took an opportunity to recur once more to the subject, expressing his hopelessness: "I say that from the House of Commons I have no hope of a Parliamentary reform; that I have no hope of a reform, but from the people themselves; that this House will never reform itself, or destroy the corruption by which it is supported, by any other means than those of the resolutions of the people, acting on the prudence of the House, and on which the people ought to resolve."[2]

[1] See *The Pamphleteer*, vol. xxi. p. 49, where this pamphlet is reprinted. It was published in 1793.

[2] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxi. p. 533.

After the rejection of the Petition in May 1793, and the determination of the House upon the subject of a change in the representation in Parliament, "the union and concert between the London Corresponding Society and the Constitutional Information Society in London seem to have acquired additional strength." It is soon after distinctly stated that "more effectual means than Petitions must be adopted, provided they are constitutional."[1]

The Government also thought more effectual means must be adopted to gain their own ends, and prosecutions followed fast on the heels of each other.

In England no Platform speeches had yet been made that justified legal proceedings, so Government had to content itself by aiming blows at speech in other places.

A Reverend Mr. Winterbotham, a dissenting preacher, was indicted for seditious words in two sermons at Plymouth—a good long way to go for a prosecution—and for each offence was sentenced to two years' imprisonment and a fine—and then bail; the sentences to follow each other.[2] One Thomas Briellat was indicted, 6th December 1793, for "seditious words on the 17th October 1792 at a public-house"; and was sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment and a fine and bail.[3] One William Hudson, a doctor, was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for "seditious words in a coffee-house after dinner after two large glasses of punch."[4]

It seemed almost as if public-house criticism on the Constitution was what the Government was most afraid of, or as if the only treason spoken in the country was the drunken braggadocio of pothouse politicians.

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxi. p. 724, Report of Secret Committee of the House of Commons.

[2] *State Trials*, vol. xxii. p. 875.

[3] *Ibid.* p. 909.

[4] *Ibid.* p. 1019.

In Scotland a more direct blow was levelled at the Platform, which, as we have seen, had there raised its head. At the end of August 1793 Thomas Muir was tried at Edinburgh. His trial, interesting in many respects, is specially noteworthy for this—that it was the first deliberate attack ever delivered against the Platform, as such, the first blow at freedom of speech on the Platform, the first time that any one was put on trial for a speech made from a Platform.[1]

Several indictments were framed against him, amongst them this one: "The wickedly and feloniously exciting, by means of seditious speeches and harangues, a spirit of disloyalty and disaffection to the King and the established Government; more especially when such speeches and harangues are addressed to meetings or convocations of persons brought together by no lawful authority, and uttered by one who is the chief instrument of calling together such meetings. Yet true it is, and of verity, that the said Thomas Muir . . . on the 3d of November 1792 (or thereabouts), having been present at a meeting in the town of Kirkintilloch, in Dumbartonshire, denominated 'A Society for Reform,' also, at another meeting in Miltoun (in county of Stirling), he did, with wicked and seditious intention, address and harangue the said meetings . . . also that he advised certain persons to read certain seditious books; further, that he attended a 'Convention of Delegates of the Associated Friends of the People,' and read an Address to them;" and a number of other charges which need not be referred to.[2] Methods of justice were rougher and readier in Scotland in those days than in England, though, indeed, even there the law of Scotland, "arbitrary as it was, had to be dis-

[1] *State Trials*, vol. xxiii. p. 117. [2] *Ibid.* p. 124.

"turbed to find a name for the offence." A man indicted for a political offence, when political feelings were running so high as they then were, was shown little favour.[1]

The trial is interesting evidence of the political temper of the times, and presents us with a complete picture of the ideas which then prevailed, not merely at the bar, but on the bench, on the subject of popular meetings, freedom of speech, and Parliamentary reform.

Muir's defence was, "That so far from exciting the people to riot and insurrection, he had upon every occasion exhorted them to pursue moderate, legal, peaceable, and constitutional measures. He admitted that on the great national question concerning an equal representation of the people in the House of Commons, he exerted every effort to procure in that House a full, fair, and equal representation of the people, as he considered it to be a measure the most salutary for the interest of his country. As he considered the information of the people to be the chief thing requisite to accomplish this great object, he had advised them to read every publication which had appeared upon either side of the question."

When the trial began, Muir objected to some of the jurors, as belonging to one of the "loyal associations" already referred to, and therefore not likely to give him an impartial trial; they having already declared by resolutions, previously passed, that he was among the enemies of the Constitution. The Solicitor-General considered the objection to be of the most extraordinary nature,[2] and the Court "repelled" the objection, the

[1] "The jurymen were filtered into the box by a process which made them very much the creatures of the Court." See *An Examination of the Trials for Sedition in Scotland*, by Lord Cockburn, vol. i. p. 80.

[2] *State Trials*, vol. xxiii. p. 135.

Lord Justice-Clerk Braxfield, a notorious judge of the most brutal type,[1] stating that "if the objection were relevant, it would go to every person who had taken the oaths to Government."

The first witness gave evidence as to the speech at Kirkintilloch. It was even on his showing a very plain and very moderate statement on the subject of Parliamentary reform and its necessity. Muir had stated "that the sole object of these Societies was to obtain Parliamentary reform, and the means for these Societies to use was to petition Parliament."

The speech at the meeting at Miltoun was on the same lines. Moderate or not mattered little. The Lord Advocate, in addressing the jury, displayed a political rancour which betrayed the bitter spirit of the times.[2] He said, first, "the prisoner had circulated Paine's 'Rights of Man' with an obstinacy and pertinacity which plainly indicated that his wish and intention was to overturn our happy Constitution;" secondly, "that he had always been found making seditious speeches and harangues among knots of ignorant labourers and poor manufacturers, who, but for him, would have remained peaceable and contented, and never thought of that incendiary Paine, nor of forming meetings, till he came like the demon of Sedition;" thirdly, "that he had been in a meeting of persons calling themselves delegates for obtaining Parliamentary reform."

In another passage in his speech he stigmatised Muir as "this demon of mischief," who used constantly to be reading seditious publications in the backshop; it was there, in that cathedral of sedition, he

[1] Lord Cockburn describes him as a "coarse and dexterous ruffian." See *Sedition Trials in Scotland*, vol. i. p. 86.

[2] *State Trials*, vol. xxiii. p. 180.

sat like a spider weaving his filthy web to ensnare the unwary.

Muir defended himself with great eloquence and cleverness, justifying his ideas on Parliamentary reform by passages from Locke, Blackstone, and other great writers, and by reference to the conduct of the Prime Minister himself. "Can it ever be forgotten that in the year 1782 Mr. Pitt was stained with the same guilt (of urging Parliamentary reform)? Did not he preach up the necessity of a reform in the representation of the people? Did not he advise the people to form Societies? and did not he countenance these Societies by his presence? I appeal to the resolutions which he subscribed in the Thatched House Tavern. . . . In the year 1782 the Duke of Richmond was a flaming advocate for the universal right of suffrage. Do you not know that he presided in Societies, and, like Mr. Pitt, advised a universal formation of such Societies all over the kingdom? Shall what was patriotism in 1782 be criminal in 1793?" But it was all in vain. The Lord Justice-Clerk Braxfield, not alone charged direct against the prisoner, but in one respect declared the charge against the prisoner proven.

"In examining whether the prisoner is guilty of sedition or not," said this "coarse and dexterous ruffian," "there are two things you should attend to, which require no proof.[1] The first is, that the British Constitution is the best in the world. Is not every man secure in his life, liberty, and property? Is not happiness in the power of every man, except those perhaps who, from disappointment in their schemes of advancement, are discontented? . . . The other circumstance is the state of this country during last winter.

[1] *State Trials*, vol. xxiii. p. 229.

There was a spirit of sedition and revolt going abroad which made every good subject seriously uneasy. I coincide in the opinion that proposing reform is very ill-timed. I leave it to you to judge whether it was perfectly innocent or not in Mr. Muir, at such a time, to go about among ignorant country people, and among the lower classes of the people, inducing them to believe that a reform was absolutely necessary to preserve their safety and their liberty. You will keep this in remembrance, and judge whether it appears to you, as to me, to be sedition.

. . . . . .

"As Mr. Muir has brought many witnesses to prove his general good behaviour, and his recommending peaceable measures and petitions to Parliament, it is your business to judge how far this should operate in his favour. Mr. Muir might have known that no attention could be paid to such a rabble. What right had they to representation? He (the judge) could have told them that the Parliament would never listen to their Petition. How could they think of it? A government in every country should be just like a corporation;[1] and in this country it is made up of the landed interest which alone has a right to be represented; as for the rabble, who have nothing but personal property, what hold has the nation of them?"

The prisoner was found guilty. The five judges delivered sentence. The first said: "The punishment to be inflicted is arbitrary, and we have our choice of banishment, fine, whipping, imprisonment, and transportation," and adopting the latter, sentenced him to fourteen years' transportation.

The second said: "The crime of which he was con-

[1] The Scotch corporations at this time were dens of jobbery and corruption.

"victed was of the most heinous kind, and there was scarcely a distinction between it and high treason, and fourteen years' transportation was a mild punishment. If punishment adequate to the crime of sedition were to be sought for, it could not be found in our law, now that torture is happily abolished." And the third and the fourth of the judges concurred, and the fifth also, after hesitating whether the transportation should be for life or fourteen years, although practically it was the same thing, and said: "Perhaps it is owing to the humanity of the Lord Advocate that the prisoner had not to stand trial for his life."

And so the first bolt was launched against the Platform, and the first victim was sent to his death in a penal settlement beyond the seas.

All this on the 31st of August 1793—a long way apparently from free political discussion on the Platform.

Within a fortnight another prosecution—that of the Reverend T. F. Palmer,[1] for circulating a seditious paper—took place at Perth, resulting in a sentence of seven years' transportation,—a trial referred to here only as showing the energy of the Government in Scotland, and as noteworthy for the views it evoked from one of the judges on universal suffrage.

Lord Abercromby said:[2] "The right of universal suffrage is a right which the subjects of this country never enjoyed; and were they to enjoy it, they would not long enjoy either liberty or a free Constitution. You will therefore consider, whether telling the people that they have a just right to what would unquestionably be tantamount to a total subversion of this Constitution, is such a writing as any person is entitled to print and to publish."

[1] *State Trials*, vol. xxiii. p. 237.

[2] *Ibid.* p. 368.

Leaving Scotland, for the moment, where the Government could work their own will without impediment of any sort against any one who made use of the Platform for popular purposes, it is desirable to revert to the proceedings of the reformers in England. Here the London Corresponding Society were making great advances, and by October had attained such an amount of popular support as enabled them to venture on an open-air meeting, and on pressing the Platform into their services. Hitherto their meetings had been confined to members, and held in rooms, but on the 24th of October 1793 a bolder course was determined on, and a meeting was held in a field at Hackney. As it was "the first open-air meeting of the Society," says Place, "it caused a great stir in London, especially in the quarter of the town where it was held." As it was the first occasion on which the Platform was adopted for political purposes by a new strata of society, and one which in aftertimes was to grow to great power and influence, the occasion is a memorable one in history.

Place[1] has left us a graphic description of it: "All the streets and avenues leading to the place where the Society assembled were crowded with people; it being also on the public roadside, a multitude of people collected."

The Committee of Delegates being in the House arranging and discussing some necessary points previous to the subject being laid before the Society at large, "the people at the outside of the railing which encircled the field behind the House, had attempted to break in upon the Society; some perhaps from curiosity, others from a different motive, to disturb the order of the Society. However, the Committee, being informed of

[1] Place, MSS., Hardy, 27,814.

"those symptoms of disorder, sent a deputation of three of their number to the Justices, who were at the Nag's Head, to demand their protection, and to invite them to be present at their deliberations. The Justices with great readiness agreed (as to the protection, but declined to be present), and stationed constables all round the field; and in order to convince the people who were present of the erroneous sentiments which they entertained as to the designs of the meeting, Mr. Gerrald and Margarot and some others harangued them from the windows of the House with such effect that they all declared by universal acclamation their approbation of the views of the Society." The people outside "were sufficiently near to hear all that was read and spoken by the Chairman of that meeting and other members of the Society."

All passed off quietly; "not one man among the vast multitude that was there convened deserved the least censure, but, on the contrary, merited the highest praise for their firm, manly, and orderly behaviour."

Once again was the scene of Platform action and Government repression shifted to Scotland. Undeterred by the severe punishment administered to Muir and the Rev. Mr. Palmer, a Convention of Delegates from the "Societies of the Friends of the People" throughout Scotland met in Edinburgh on the 20th of October. No English delegates attended, but a few days afterwards some arrived, and a new convention was summoned, and met at Edinburgh on the 19th of November 1793, about 160 persons being at it. Their proceedings were open to the public, and their resolutions were debated and adopted in the presence of all persons who chose to attend.

Having met, it changed its name to "The British

Convention of Delegates of the People, associated to obtain universal suffrage and annual Parliaments;"[1] but with the besetting folly of men anxious to make themselves remarkable, they assumed, even to the form of date, "the first year of the British Convention, one and indivisible," the style and mode of proceeding adopted by the National Convention of France.

This silly imitation of the French revolutionists, the affected use of French phrases, the bombastic and imperious language of the speakers, all gave colour to the view of the Government, that the real object of the Convention and of all these Societies was to follow the French revolutionists in other matters as well—to subvert the Constitution of Great Britain, and to plunge the country into bloodshed and anarchy.

The Convention met with no interruption for a fortnight, but having passed a defiant resolution that, despite any legislation to the contrary, they would continue to meet and act—a proceeding which naturally attracted the attention of the law officers of the Crown—the Provost, and some of the Magistrates of Edinburgh, attended by a constable, "invaded the Convention," and insisted on its dispersion; and on the following day the ringleaders—Margarot, Gerrald, and Skirving—were arrested, all their papers seized, and prosecutions instituted against them.

Skirving was the first to be tried.[2] The charges against him were—circulating a seditious writing or publication, being an active member of an illegal association, and taking part in the Convention, where the members "did wickedly and feloniously make harangues and speeches."[3] The Solicitor-General, in opening the

[1] See Report of Secret Committee of the House of Commons, *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxi. p. 731.

[2] 6th January 1794.

[3] *State Trials*, vol. xxiii. p. 476.

case, said, "That the whole proceedings of the meeting of the Convention were from first to last illegal, seditious, and not to be tolerated in any established Government. . . . The people of Great Britain, we have reason to be thankful, are represented in Parliament. The very name of British Convention carries sedition along with it. . . . It is assuming a title which none but the members of the established Government have a right to assume. And the British Convention associated for what? For the purpose of obtaining universal suffrage; in other words, for the purpose of subverting the Government of Great Britain."

Skirving was found guilty and sentenced to fourteen years' transportation. Lord Swinton, the judge, laying down the law, "that sedition consists in every attempt to excite, by inflammatory discourses and illegal associations, the people to outrage and violence against the Constitution, to hurt the public peace."[1]

A week later Margarot was indicted. His must have been a more flagrant case in the eyes of the Scotch authorities, for he had come from London as a delegate of "an association of seditious people," calling themselves the "Corresponding Society of London," to attend the Convention. Among other charges against him was that of uttering and making "various seditious and inflammatory speeches, tending to vilify our present happy Constitution, and to withdraw therefrom the confidence and attachment of our subjects."[2] He was convicted, and was sentenced to fourteen years' transportation. Lord Swinton said: "They have pretended a reformation in the Constitution. I say, my Lords, there is no need for it; our Constitution reforms itself."[3]

[1] *State Trials*, vol. xxiii. p. 597.
[2] *Ibid.* p. 609.
[3] *Ibid.* p. 775.

Joseph Gerrald was indicted 3d March 1794 "for that he did wickedly and feloniously make harangues and speeches" at the Convention.[1] His trial was productive of a statement from the Solicitor-General which is worth recording, as showing the preposterous views held on freedom of speech by some of the higher officials of the Government at this time.

"From our birth," said this illustrious official lawyer, "we owe allegiance to the Constitution established at the Revolution. We are not to venture to say that another Constitution would do better in its place. I say, by law we owe allegiance to it from our birth, and that no body of men have a liberty to say we will indulge in speculation, and there is no harm in speculation. I say, that subjects of Great Britain, born under allegiance to the Constitution, have no such liberty."[2]

Gerrald too was sentenced to fourteen years' transportation.

It has been necessary to dwell somewhat minutely on these Scotch trials, as they were the first cases in which the action of the Platform was the principal ground of indictment, for public speeches in a Convention of this sort, open to the public, come clearly within the meaning of "the Platform." But it has also been necessary to refer to them because, as will be hereafter pointed out, they were to exercise a very powerful influence on the popular mind in Scotland.

The Government and the "loyal associations," of "word-catching, libel-catching men," and that morbidly sensitive portion of the community which is unable to keep its head when any political excitement is in the air, succeeded in working the whole country

[1] *State Trials*, vol. xxiii. p. 815. [2] *Ibid.* p. 937.

into a state of feeling of the highest tension. "Such is the state of the public mind," wrote Jeffrey[1] in March 1793, "that I get the name of a violent man for regretting the effusion of blood, and for wishing for universal concord;" nor had it improved by the next year. The able compiler of *The History of the Two Acts* also thus sums up the intolerance of the Government and its supporters.[2]

"To object to their will is to be disloyal; to vote, speak, or write against their measures is unconstitutional; and to meet for the purpose of promoting a reform of Parliament is first factious, then seditious, then treasonable; first punished with fine, imprisonment, and banishment, and then threatened with death. I do not say that all these are the positive acts of Ministers, but they are the declared sentiments of their supporters. And when no distinction is made between that regular and constitutional opposition to Ministerial measures which, in all ages, has afforded protection to our liberties, and the more outrageous acts of individuals, or the unreasonable complaints and proceedings of obscure societies, are we to wonder if a force becomes embodied against Government which carries a formidable appearance?"

Nothing daunted by the treatment which the participators in the Convention at Edinburgh had received, the two principal London Societies continued their agitation, and towards the end of March delegates from them met and agreed on the desirability of holding a Convention "for the purpose of taking into consideration the proper methods of obtaining a full and fair representation of the people," and circular letters were

[1] See *Life of Lord Jeffrey*, by Lord Cockburn, vol. ii. p. 12.

[2] See *The History of the Two Acts*, p. xlvii.

sent to different parts of the kingdom on the subject of assembling a Convention of the whole island."[1]

But they did not stop here. The open-air meeting of the London Corresponding Society in October 1793 having been so successful, and the Platform having proved itself so efficient and powerful an instrument for furthering their cause, another great open-air meeting was announced and held at Chalk Farm on 14th April 1794 "on the Hampstead Road, at the bottom of Primrose Hill, about three miles out of town." Place gives an account of it far fuller and more graphic than the meagre particulars of it which can be gathered from the reports in the *State Trials*.[2]

John Lovett, a hairdresser, was Chairman or President. "The President stood on the stair of the Assembly room facing the bowling-green, where the Society were assembled," and from that elevated situation John Richter read some letters; some resolutions were read and agreed to, also several addresses. "After the business of the meeting was concluded, which lasted upwards of five hours, the immense multitude which was called together (independent of the Society) of all descriptions of persons—men and women, hundreds from mere curiosity, the day being very fine,—in less than a quarter of an hour that large body left Chalk Farm in the greatest order I ever witnessed; they seemed all highly satisfied, although they received many insults and provocations from the Bow Street runners and different police officers and Government spies and reporters; yea, from some magistrates. . . . Little did they think what sort of men they were contending with; they were *thinking* and

[1] First Report of House of Commons Committee of Secrecy, *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxi. p. 488.

[2] Place, MSS., 27,814, British Museum, p. 76.

"*reasoning* men, that did not meet together to call out 'Church and King for ever,' without examining whether Church and King deserved to be held in everlasting remembrance"—true type of the thinking man.

Just about this same time the Platform was called into requisition in several places in the provinces, and open-air meetings were held at Leeds, Wakefield, Bradford, Halifax, and Sheffield. It is evident that these civic industrial people were beginning to find the usefulness of the Platform.

This Sheffield meeting, which was held on the 7th April 1794, deserves special notice—first because we have a very full description of the proceedings at it which are in themselves interesting, and next because one of the speakers, a Mr. Henry Yorke was afterwards indicted on account of his speech at it.[1] There existed in Sheffield at the time a Society called "The Friends of Justice, Liberty, and Humanity." An advertisement was issued calling a public meeting in the open air, "to consider the propriety of addressing the King in behalf of the persecuted patriots, citizens Muir, Palmer, Skirving, Margarot, and Gerrald, also of again petitioning for a reform in the representation of the people."

The advertisement produced a meeting of some 4000 to 5000 persons.

"When it was known that Mr. Yorke was without the ground, a great move was directly made from all quarters. 'Mr. Yorke, Mr. Yorke, in the chair,' and the crowd made an opening for him, and he was pressed forward.

"He was placed upon an eminence, a form made for the purpose; at Sheffield we call it a tribune."

[1] See *State Trials*, vol. xxv. p. 1003.

Yorke was a member of the London Corresponding Society, and had been working in the northern parts of the country in furtherance of the objects of the Society. One witness subsequently declared, though his statement was contradicted, that Yorke had said that he was about twenty-two years of age, and that he had been concerned in three revolutions already; though late, he had assisted the revolution in America, "essentially contributed to that in Holland, 'materially assisted' that in France, and that he was one who will still continue to cause revolutions all over the world."

Such was the type of man into whose hands had come the earliest lessons in the political education of the people. Placed upon the "tribune" he delivered a speech.

"Fellow-citizens. The day is at length arrived when fanaticism and superstition, deprived of their tinsel trappings, and exposed in their native ugliness to the view of mankind, slink scowling back to the cave of obscurity; there I hope they will for ever remain.[1] The energy of Englishmen will no longer endure this strange uproar of injustice. I trust my countrymen are sick of religious and political imposture, and that their decisive and manly conduct will command, in an imperious tone, which will take no denial, not a melioration of these enormous abuses, which would be to compromise with injustice, but, I trust, they will demand the annihilation of corruptions and abuses, and a restitution of the original rights of human nature. The Governments of Europe present no delectable symmetry to the contemplation of the philosopher, no enjoyment to the satisfaction of the citizen. A vast deformed and cheerless structure, the frightful abortion of haste and

[1] *State Trials*, vol. xxv. p. 1006.

"usurpation, presents to the eye of the beholder no systematic arrangement, no harmonious organisation of society. Chance, haste, faction, tyranny, rebellion, massacre, and the hot inclement action of human passions have begotten them. Utility never has been the end of their institution, but partial interest has been its fruit. Such abominable and such absurd forms, such jarring and dissonant principles, which chance has scattered over the earth, cry aloud for something more natural, more pure, and more calculated to promote the happiness of mankind. It must be granted that this experience is important, because it teaches the suffering nations of the present day in what manner to prepare their combustible ingredients, and humanists in what manner to enkindle them, so as to produce with effect that grand political explosion which, at the same time that it buries despotism, already convulsive and agonising, in ruins, may raise up the people to the dignity and sublime grandeur of freedom. . . . Go on as you hitherto have done in the culture of reason. Disseminate throughout the whole of your country that knowledge which is so necessary to man's happiness, and which you have yourselves acquired.

"Teach your children, and your countrymen, the sacred lessons of virtue, which are the foundation of all human polity. Teach them to respect themselves, and to love their country. Teach them to do unto all men as they would that they should do unto them, and their love shall not be confined to their country, but shall extend to the whole human race.

"When such a revolution of sentiment shall have dispersed the mists of prejudice, when, by the incessant thunderings from the Press, the meanest cottager of our country shall be enlightened, and the sun of reason shall

shine in its fullest meridian over us, then the commanding voice of the whole people shall recommend the 558 gentlemen in St. Stephen's Chapel to go about their business."

A resolution was passed that, "Convinced of this truth, it is the opinion of this meeting that the people ought to demand as a right, and not petition as a favour, for universal representation. That, therefore, we will petition the House of Commons no more on the subject."[1]

One little touch of nature vivifies the whole occurrence. "There were constables there," and one of these constables, who afterwards gave evidence, said, "The people made a great noise about me, and would not suffer me to hear; several that were round me."[2]

Yorke subsequently published a copy of his speech which rendered a prosecution against him possible; but as that did not take place for more than a year, the details of his trial must be postponed.[3]

The idea of holding a Convention became more definite. The "Society of the Friends of the People" declined to join it, "fearing it would furnish the enemies of reform with the means of calumniating its advocates, and so far from forwarding the cause, would deter many from countenancing that which they approve."

The Government policy also became more definite and vigorous. Suddenly, and before any of the arrangements for the Convention could be completed, a great coup was made. Several of the most prominent men in the two Societies—Hardy, Thelwall, Tooke, and others were arrested, and their papers seized. Parliament was

[1] Second Report of Secret Committee of House of Commons.—*Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxi. p. 736.

[2] *State Trials*, vol. xxv. p. 1059.

[3] Tried 23d July 1795.

informed by Royal Message on the 12th May 1794 that "His Majesty, having received information that the seditious practices which have been for some time carried on by certain Societies in London, in correspondence with Societies in different parts of the country, had lately been pursued with increased activity and boldness, and had been avowedly directed to the object of assembling a pretended general Convention of the people in contempt and defiance of the authority of Parliament . . . and directly tended to the introduction of that system of anarchy and confusion which has fatally prevailed in France."[1] He had given directions for seizing the papers and books of the said Societies. His orders had been carried out, and he accordingly referred the papers which had been seized to Parliament. Special Secret Committees of both Houses were at once appointed to consider them, and on 16th May the Committee of the House of Commons reported. They said that "the books, etc., contained a full account of the proceedings of the Societies calling themselves 'The Society for Constitutional Information,' and 'The London Corresponding Society,' which appear to be closely connected with other Societies in many parts of Great Britain," and they went on to express the gravamen of the charge against the Societies in these words:

"It is impossible not to conclude that the measures which have been stated are directed to the object of assembling a meeting which, under the name of a general Convention, may take upon itself the character of a general representation of the people. However, at different periods, the term of Parliamentary reform may have been employed, it is obvious that the present view of these Societies is not intended to be prosecuted by

[1] *Parliamentary History*, 1794, vol. xxxi. p. 471.

any application to Parliament, but, on the contrary, by an open attempt to supersede the House of Commons in its representative capacity, and to assume to itself all the functions and powers of a national legislature."[1] "The Committee are satisfied that the design now openly professed and acted upon aims at nothing less than what is stated in his Majesty's message, and must be considered as a traitorous conspiracy for the subversion of the established laws and constitution, and the introduction of that system of anarchy and confusion which has fatally prevailed in France."

Fortified with this report, Pitt, on the 16th of May 1794, moved the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, so far as related to any one charged with high treason, the suspicion of high treason, or treasonable practices. The preamble of the Bill (34 Geo. III. cap. 54) declared that "a traitorous and detestable conspiracy has been formed for subverting the existing laws and constitution, and for introducing the system of anarchy and confusion which has so fatally prevailed in France"; and the Bill proposed to enact that any one charged with high treason, suspicion of high treason, or treasonable practices, might be apprehended and detained in custody by warrant of the Secretary of State, etc., until the 1st February 1795,—the practical effect of which was "that his Majesty might cause to be apprehended and kept in jail any, and consequently every, person whom he, that is, his Ministers, might think or suspect of conspiracy against his Majesty's person or Government."

Pitt said that "so formidable a conspiracy had never before existed," and that the whole "system of insurrection would appear to be laid in the modern doctrine

[1] See The Report of the Committee, *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxi. p. 495.

"of the rights of man, that monstrous doctrine under which the weak and ignorant, who are most susceptible of impression from such barren abstract positions, were attempted to be seduced to overturn government, law, property, security, religion, order, and everything valuable in this country, as men acting upon the same ideas had already overturned and destroyed everything in France, and disturbed the peace and endangered the safety, if not the existence, of every nation in Europe."[1]

The proposal was vehemently, but of course fruitlessly, resisted in the House of Commons. Fox declared: "It was no less than giving to the Executive authority absolute power over the personal liberty of every individual in the kingdom. . . . That which every man was entitled to do, delivering the sentiments of his heart upon the affairs of government, for the benefit of the public, would be at an end;" and a little later he again spoke and said: "To deny to the people the right of discussion, because, upon some occasions, that right had been exercised by indiscreet or bad men, was what he could not subscribe to. The right of popular discussion was a salutary and essential privilege of the subject. He could not answer long for the conduct of Parliament, if it were not subject to the jealousy of the people. . . . The best security for the due maintenance of the Constitution was in the strict and incessant vigilance of the people over Parliament itself. Meetings of the people therefore, for the discussion of public objects, were not merely legal, but laudable."[2]

In the House of Lords the Government view found naturally more unrestrained expression than in the House of Commons. When the Bill got there, Lord Grenville (Secretary of State) said that at a meeting of

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxi. p. 497. [2] *Ibid.* p. 560.

the London Corresponding Society, on the 20th of January 1794, at which 2000 people were present, the speakers "proceeded to animadvert on Parliament in a strain too indecent for their Lordships to hear repeated"; and he went on: "It was stated that they looked for Parliamentary reform by legal means; but was any man simple enough to believe that they were sincere in this declaration? The object of the authors of these proceedings was not a Parliamentary reform, but the destruction of our monarchy, the destruction of that House, and the destruction of the House of Commons, the subversion of all law, order, rank, distinction, and property." [1]

The Bill passed, and immediately after the prorogation of Parliament, the desertion of the people by those who should have been leading them, and keeping them from extreme courses, received its formal completion in the admission of the Duke of Portland, and other leaders of the Whig party, into office with the Tories.

"The great Whig party which Fox led had broken off into two divisions: the one imbibed, even more than the Minister, those alarms of Democracy which there wanted nothing but firmness and calm temper to dissipate; the other embracing speculations of reform, for which the country was little prepared, frightened lovers of peace." [2]

This Coalition between the Tories and these Whig leaders, which was regarded with wide approbation at the time as giving proof of the cessation of party strife and feeling in the face of grave national danger, had the unfortunate effect of depriving a considerable section of the people of their natural leaders, just at

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxi. p. 579. [2] See Russell's *Fox*, vol. iii. p. 23.

the time that they were most in want of counsel and guidance.

Erskine, in a speech delivered in the following year (17th November 1795), said that, "in the whole of the late proceedings and events, one of the most fatal things had been that the higher orders of the people separated themselves too much from the lower"; and to point the moral of his observation, he added, "This has been one of the causes of the revolution in France." [1]

Impartial investigators of the events of this period can, I think, form but one judgment as regards the policy of the Government in dealing with the action of these Societies, and that is, that the Government was wholly mistaken as to the gravity of the popular agitation at home. That agitation never had any real force or strength; never was there for even one moment the slightest possibility of these Societies and their members making any formidable demonstration against the Government, much less a successful one. The more the evidence is sifted, the more irresistibly is one impelled to this conclusion. The whole plans of the Societies were so crude, their whole resources so paltry, their leaders so incapable, their numbers, when compared with the rest of the population, so insignificant, that they had no real power to hurt the Government. But this is sure,—they served as an excuse to the Government to crush what was behind them—to crush out the spirit of inquiry which was already becoming too curious in the affairs of Government, to crush out the demand for the reform of abuses which were incapable of defence, to silence that public discussion on those affairs, and institutions, and actions of the Government which would not bear discussion. Herein lay the secret of the

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxii. p. 313.

Government energy, and of the frantic virulence of their dependents. Privilege was endangered, abuses threatened; those who were interested in maintaining these evils became wild; hence the blatant loud-mouthedness, the transparent falsehoods, the vehement vindictiveness displayed in the speeches of member after member both of the House of Commons and of the House of Lords. The Parliamentary history of the closing years of the last century is full of splendid eloquence—examples of the highest oratory; but it is full, too, of examples of the meanest, basest selfishness—the lowest depth to which Parliamentary speech can be degraded. The Government had ample powers in the rough crude state of the law that then existed to deal with meetings, and speeches, and "libels." That they were not content with them proves, I think, conclusively that they wanted to check criticism on themselves, and to strike a crushing blow at liberty of opinion and freedom of speech.

The Act suspending the Habeas Corpus was not allowed to remain a dead letter. Many persons were arrested and confined without any hope of being brought to trial. Men were spirited away, to return only when the Act expired—men, presumably, deeply imbued in guilt, but the proof must have been inconclusive as no attempt was ever made by the Government to put them on their trial on any charge whatever.[1]

Two trials which took place in Scotland in the

[1] I have been unable to find any information as to the number of persons arrested under this Act. In 1817 (*Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxvi. p. 941, 11th June) Sir F. Burdett, in moving for a return of the number of persons arrested under the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act in that year, said: "In 1797 he made a similar motion, which was assented to without any hesitation," but the return was never printed. Perhaps it could be traced in the MS. records of the House of Commons. The information would be interesting if obtainable.

course of the autumn (3d September 1794) must briefly be adverted to before mentioning those of the members of the London Societies. Two men, Robert Watt and David Downie, were tried at Edinburgh in September 1794. Downie, it would appear, was an honest reformer, but "Watt was a spy in the pay of the Government, and a great instigator in procuring the manufacture of pikes."[1] He had some of them secreted in his house; when a search was made in it for bankrupt goods the pikes were discovered. He was apprehended, tried on a charge of high treason, and convicted. Downie was also convicted, but the latter, being recommended to mercy by the jury, was reprieved. Watt, the spy, however, caught in the net he had prepared for others, suffered the last penalty of the law on 15th of October.[2]

Whilst the details of his hanging and subsequent decapitation were still the conversation of the day, Thomas Hardy, the Secretary of the London Corresponding Society, was put on trial in London on the 28th October on no less a charge than high treason, the success of Ministers in getting convictions in Scotland having made them confident of convicting the men they had seized in London, even on a capital charge. A special commission was appointed to try him and his fellow-prisoners.[3]

The charge against him was, that "not having the fear of God in his heart, but being moved and seduced by the instigation of the devil, as a false traitor . . . he did intend to stir, move, and excite insurrection, rebellion, and war against our lord the King, and to subvert and alter the Legislature, rule, and Govern-

[1] *State Trials*, vol. xxiii. p. 1167; and vol. xxiv. p. 1.

[2] See his dying Declaration and Confession, *State Trials*, vol. xxiii. p. 1394.

[3] *State Trials*, vol. xxiv. p. 199.

ment now duly and happily established; and to depose him, and to bring and put him to death," etc.; and that he and his fellow-prisoners "amongst themselves and together with divers other false traitors, whose names are unknown, did conspire" to do those things just mentioned. All this was attempted to be proven by giving in evidence the recorded proceedings of the Societies, their correspondence, the speeches of their members, the plan of the proposed Convention, and then proving that he was concerned therein.

The Attorney-General thus described the conduct of the men he was now proceeding against.

"You will find these men inflaming the ignorant, under pretence of enlightening them; debauching their principles towards their country, under pretence of infusing political knowledge into them; addressing themselves principally to those whose rights, whose interests, are in the eye of the law and Constitution of England as valuable as those of any men, but whose education does not enable them immediately to distinguish between political truth and the misrepresentations held out to them; working upon the passions of men whom Providence hath placed in the lower but useful and highly respectable situations in life, to irritate them against all whom its bounty hath blessed by assigning to them situations of rank and property, representing them as their oppressors, as their enemies, as their plunderers, as those whom they should not suffer to exist."[1]

Parliament had but just declared by Act that a traitorous conspiracy had been formed for subverting the existing laws and Constitution, therefore the case against Hardy looked like a foregone conclusion, and the Scotch

[1] *State Trials*, vol. xxiv. p. 272.

trials had shown how easy it was to utilise every speech, book, pamphlet, or paper as condemnatory evidence; but, thanks to the ever memorable defence of the greatest orator which the Bar has ever had, the allegations in the indictment were shown to be unsustainable. Indiscretions were admitted, but that these indiscretions amounted to high treason was completely disproved. The case was one of the utmost importance. As Erskine, in his defence of the prisoner, said, "If upon this evidence there can stand a conviction for high treason, it is plain that no man can be said to have a life which is his own. For how can he possibly know by what engines it may be snared, or from what unknown sources it may be attacked and overpowered?"[1]

Even Grey, though a prominent and most able Member of Parliament and heir to a peerage, felt alarmed for his own personal safety if such a construction of the law of treason received legal sanction. We find him writing to his wife, denouncing strongly "the new constructions of treason under which no man was safe. You see by these new constructions of treason, they have found a much better way of disposing of obnoxious persons than by sending them to Botany Bay. . . . If Hardy is hanged, there is no safety for any one; innocence no longer affords protection to persons obnoxious to those in power, and I do not know how soon it may come my turn."[2]

Freedom of public discussion in fact, as well as Hardy's life, hung in the scales. Had the prosecution succeeded, even the slightest comment on the Government, or on any part of the Constitution, would only have been possible at the risk of a prosecution for high treason, and if conviction followed, ignominious death.

[1] *State Trials*, vol. xxiv. p. 938.

[2] See Grey's *Life of Lord Grey*, p. 28.

Happily the prosecution did not succeed. The jury immortalised itself by bringing in a verdict of "Not guilty," —a verdict greeted with the wildest, most enthusiastic acclamation by the multitude outside the Court.

Having put their hand to the plough the Government were bound to go on despite this reverse; and on 17th of November the Reverend John Horne-Tooke, he who had made his name and fame in Middlesex as the champion and supporter of Wilkes, was tried for high treason. Hardy had been singled out as one of the principal men of "The London Corresponding Society." Tooke was now selected as one of the principal men of "The Society for Constitutional Information"—these two Societies being, according to Pitt, the mainspring of the whole business. But the prosecution against him was not more successful, and he too was acquitted. It was clearly hopeless securing a conviction on the charge of high treason, and on 1st December the Attorney-General proposed that several other of the prisoners should be acquitted. One more attempt, however, was made, and Thelwall was indicted, but after four days' trial he too was acquitted, and then the Attorney-General, finally defeated, asked for the acquittal of the remaining prisoners.

The real purport and meaning of these acquittals is best gathered from the debates which took place when Parliament met. Early in January 1795 Sheridan moved the repeal of the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act.[1]

"He did not hesitate to say the evidence at the trials did not exhibit instances of many gross and scandalous libels. He was ready to admit that there were in the Societies mischievous men intent on mischievous purposes. There were others actuated by enthusiasm

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxi. p. 1065.

"and the adoption of French phrases was contemptibly foolish;" but "the verdicts of repeated juries had negatived the existence of any plot." He compared the proposed Convention of 1794 with the actual one of 1780, and the Parliamentary reformers of those two periods, wittily remarking: "We make a boast of equal laws. If these men are to be considered as guilty of high treason, let us have some retrospective hanging, and whatever in that case may happen to me, his Majesty will at least derive some benefit, since he will thereby get rid of a majority of his present Cabinet."

Erskine, more seriously, thus summed up the effect of the trials and acquittals: "The questions of fact submitted to the jury were whether the defendants compassed and imagined the King's death? and whether, in pursuance of that traitorous purpose, they conspired to hold a Convention, which should assume the functions of Parliament? and whether they conspired to provide arms for that traitorous purpose? and whether they published various papers with the traitorous purpose, either to hold a Convention for the traitorous purposes charged, or to levy war and rebellion generally against the King? . . . The juries, by their verdicts, had not merely by probable inference, but almost directly and technically, negatived the existence of the conspiracy upon which the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act was founded.[1] . . .

"It was clear to demonstration that the jury could not have acquitted Hardy upon any other principle on earth, consistently with common honesty and common sense, than upon the utter disbelief of the existence of the conspiracy as charged.

"The gross falsehood and absurdity of the supposed

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxi. p. 1090.

conspiracy was the sheet-anchor on which we relied, and on which we prevailed."

Sheridan's motion for the repeal of the Suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act was rejected; and shortly afterwards a Bill continuing its suspension was introduced. The second reading was carried by 239 to 53, so small was the popular party in the House of Commons, and the Bill soon became law. By it the Habeas Corpus Act was further suspended until the 1st July in that year (1795).

The Government had been distinctly worsted in their prosecutions in England, and their grand attack on the use of the Platform had resulted in a disgrace-covering fiasco; but it was not long before they set about rectifying the error they had perpetrated. The mistake which they made was magnifying the charge against the men into "high treason." Perhaps on a less heinous charge a conviction would be possible. Accordingly Henry Yorke, whose speech has already been quoted, and who was in custody on a charge of high treason, was made the subject of experiment. The Government pitched their tone in a lower key, abandoned the charge against him of high treason, tried him for seditious conspiracy, and were successful. The indictment against him, and against Gales, a printer, and Davison, a labourer, who printed the speech, was that "being malicious, seditious, and ill-disposed persons, they did unlawfully and seditiously combine, conspire, etc., to traduce, vilify, and defame the Commons House of Parliament, and the Government of the realm, and to excite a spirit of discontent, disaffection, and sedition in the minds of the liege subjects of our said lord the King,"[1] etc.; and that on the 7th April 1794, at Shef-

[1] *State Trials*, vol. xxv. p. 1003.

field, they did cause and procure some 4000 persons to meet and assemble together at a certain open place called the Castle Hill at Sheffield, at which were uttered and published "divers scandalous, seditious, inflammatory speeches." Sir Fitz-James Stephen, commenting on this case in his work on *Criminal Law*,[1] remarks that this was the first instance of a prosecution with which he was acquainted in which the law of conspiracy to political, and especially to seditious offences, was applied.

"It was said at the time (of the trial of Hardy and the others) that if the prosecution had been for a seditious conspiracy it must have succeeded, and after the failure of the prosecutions for treason, Yorke was accordingly prosecuted for a seditious conspiracy on facts closely resembling, and closely connected with, those which had been made the subject of the prosecutions for treason.

"The indictment charged in substance a conspiracy to traduce and vilify the House of Commons and the Government, and to excite disaffection and sedition, as overt acts of which conspiracy it was alleged that meetings were held at different places for the purpose of hearing seditious and inflammatory speeches."

On this more moderate charge Yorke was convicted and sentenced to a fine of £200, to two years' imprisonment, and to find security for good behaviour for seven years.

The sentence of course was not quite so deterrent as would have been one for high treason, but the Government must have been well content to find that Platform speeches could be effectually dealt with.

[1] Vol. ii. p. 378.

CHAPTER VII

THE FIRST SUPPRESSION OF THE PLATFORM

AFTER the failure of the prosecutions of their principal men, the Societies took fresh courage, and entered upon a more vigorous campaign; but as the suspension of the Habeas Corpus remained in operation till the 1st of July, they had at first to be cautious. The public meetings which had been held at Hackney Fields in 1793, and Chalk Farm in 1794, had been so successful in their results, and the Platform had been so stimulating in its effect, that, as the summer drew on, and the expiration of the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act drew nigh, the London Corresponding Society determined on convening another open-air meeting "for the purpose of considering the best means of obtaining Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments."

The Society had gained so much in numbers and notoriety that the Platform now afforded it the most efficient assistance in continuing and extending its operations, and, accordingly, recourse to the Platform was becoming more and more frequent.

The meeting was held on Monday, 29th of June 1795, in an enclosed field near the obelisk, in St. George's Fields, Borough Road. The proceedings were very fully reported, and present an interesting picture

of one of the meetings of these London reformers. About 3 P.M. "Citizen" John Gale Jones, a "vehement declaimer," took the chair, and proceeded to address the meeting, which was a very large one.[1] "Citizens," said the Chairman, "it is with infinite satisfaction that I behold here assembled so very numerous and respectable a meeting; it presents, indeed, to my view a spectacle at once sublime and awful, since it seems as if the whole British nation had convened itself upon this extraordinary occasion to witness the propriety of our conduct, and testify for the legality of our proceedings. They will not, I believe, be disappointed. We meet for no other than our original purpose—a Parliamentary Reform—and disclaim all intention of tumult or violence.

"I hope, by our firm, yet moderate conduct, we shall gain the goodwill and concurrence of all who are here present, and convince them that we are, as we ever have been, the sincere advocates and steady promoters of universal peace and tranquillity.

"The immediate objects to which I would call your attention are,—an *Address to the Nation*, another *to the King*, and a few Resolutions expressive of the present situation of the country, and our determination to pursue, by every legal and constitutional method, the best means of obtaining our natural rights, Universal Suffrage, and Annual Parliaments."

An "Address to the Nation" was adopted.

A few extracts from it will convey sufficient idea of its general style.

"After the lapse of more than a twelvemonth, replete with fearful agitation and alarm, the London Corresponding Society, still firm in its principles and

[1] See *History of Two Acts*, p. 91.

faithful to its original purpose, again offers itself to your notice." . . .

"It is now nearly four years since we first called your attention to the circumstances of the times, and to the situation of your country; if it were necessary *then* to associate, how much more is that necessity *now* increased! We felt it our duty to unite and proclaim our grievances; those grievances are augmented tenfold; and is this a time to be silent or abandon our cause? . . . And is it a time to relinquish all further exertions and desert our principles? Surely not! The public mind is at length roused to a sense of its situation; it sees the dreadful precipice on which it stands; it encourages us to proceed in our useful and virtuous career, and assures us it will second our endeavours. Yes, Britons! you begin to exert the privilege of thinking, and mental energy will soon be succeeded by determined resolution. You will not quietly see your country laid in ruins, to gratify the lofty arrogance of an insolent Administration. You will not much longer permit your fellow-citizens to be dragged from their peaceful occupations to fight against the liberties of mankind. . . . Away with cold calculations of safety or prudence, with paltry expedients and ill-timed fears. It is necessary for all honest men to speak out—the times and the country demand it. Are we men, and shall we not speak? Are we Britons, and is not liberty our birthright? There is no power on earth shall silence the voice of an injured nation, or prevent the progress of free inquiry! Bring forth your whips and racks, ye ministers of vengeance. Produce your scaffolds and your executioners! Erect barracks in every street and bastiles in every corner! Persecute and punish every innocent individual; but you will not succeed. The

"voice of reason, like the roaring of the Nemean lion, shall issue even from the cavern's mouth! The holy blood of Patriotism, streaming from the severing axe, shall carry with it the infant seeds of Liberty, and men may perish, but Truth shall be eternal."

. . . . . .

"Let us entreat you not to fall into those fatal errors which have so frequently misled our ancestors, nor rest your expectations on that delusive phantom—a change of Ministers. With *such* a House of Commons, no Ministry *can* perform its duty to the people! Your CHIEF, perhaps your ONLY hope, is in YOURSELVES. . . . We conjure you by that Freedom we adore, that Constitution we venerate, and that common interest we all possess in the prosperity of our country, to unite your vigorous exertions with ours, and by every legal and constitutional method endeavour to procure to the people of Great Britain their *natural* and *undoubted Rights*—UNIVERSAL SUFFRAGE and ANNUAL PARLIAMENTS."

This Address, having been twice read to the members within the field, was carried to the wall opposite the President, which afforded the greatest opportunity of communicating the proceedings to the immense multitude which surrounded the meeting.

An "Address to the King" was also adopted, asking in not very moderate terms for the reform of Parliament, the dismissal of Ministers, and for a termination of the war.

"It is necessary, Sire, that you should be undeceived; and if you have not an honest Minister, that will dare to speak the truth, *the people should instruct their Sovereign, and save him from destruction.* We conjure you, Sire, in the name, and for the sake of that glorious Revolution, which seated the House of Bruns-

wick on the Throne, to yield a timely attention to the cries of a suffering people, and to exert that power with which the Constitution has intrusted you; to give them that free and equal representation which can alone enable the British Nation to prevent future and remove the present calamities; to dismiss from your councils those guilty Ministers who have so long with impunity insulted us, and betrayed our dearest interests; to put an immediate period to the ravages of a cruel and destructive war, and to restore to us that peace and tranquillity which are so essentially necessary for your OWN PERSONAL SECURITY AND FOR THE HAPPINESS OF THE PEOPLE."

After considerable discussion as to the terms of the Address to the King, and the adoption of some resolutions, Citizen Gale Jones again spoke and said: "I hope the event of this truly great and glorious day will fully prove to the world that a large body of the people can, even in the most critical and perilous times, assemble to deliberate upon public measures, without the smallest violation of order or the slightest breach of decorum."

The meeting, which had been peaceable and orderly throughout, then quietly dispersed.

What a strange and startling event must this great meeting have been to the ruling classes of that time—something to ponder over and consider—its danger looking more formidable under the lurid lights of the French Revolution still quivering in the sky!

As the summer and autumn went on, signs of increasing unrest showed themselves, and Ministers determined on an early meeting of Parliament.

Place, to whom we are indebted for much valuable information, explains much that otherwise would be

difficult quite to realise. Writing of this precise time, he says: "The whole country was in a ferment from the idea which was universally prevalent, that the Ministry would listen to no terms of peace with France, without which there was but little reason to hope for the return of plenty, and this was understood to be the cause of the Parliament being called together earlier than usual.

"The state of irritation which the circumstances of the time produced drove the people into clubs and associations to obtain peace, reform, and cheap bread. Those who associated were fully persuaded that by causing as great a ferment as possible the Government would be overawed, and concede what they requested. Mr. Grey had said in his place in Parliament, the House will never reform itself or destroy the corruption by which it is upheld by any other means than those of the resolutions of the people acting on the prudence of the House. That point they could only accomplish by meeting in bodies as recommended by the Ministers in 1782.

"This was firmly and reasonably believed by vast numbers of the people, who were, however, mistaken in supposing the time was come when the people could act on the prudence of the House so as to obtain a reform."[1]

"In this state of irritated feelings," continues Place, "The London Corresponding Society called a public meeting of the people in a field near Copenhagen House, near Islington, on 26th October 1795."

"This," he characterises as "an injudicious proceeding." Many persons shared his views, and were against holding a meeting, but he says: "Almost everybody with whom I talked were persuaded that

[1] Place, MSS., 27,808, p. 36.

the House of Commons would be induced to consent to a radical reform in the state of the representation, and on this notion the Society proceeded."

In *The History of Two Acts* an account of this meeting is given. "The indifference with which the late Address from this Society to the King was treated; the rapid approximation of national destruction; the continuation of the present detestable war; the horrors of an approaching famine; and, above all, the increased corruption, and inquisitorial measures pursued and pursuing by those who hold the country in bondage, obliged this Society to appeal once more to their fellow-countrymen, and their common friends the advocates of reform, in order to obtain, by an open and explicit discussion of those several topics, a precise and unequivocal declaration of the public opinion, upon objects so essential to the present good and future glory of this country."

This time "Citizen" John Binns was chairman.

"The number of people at the meeting was very great (150,000 it was said, but that of course was an exaggeration). There were three Platforms, called tribunes, erected at what was supposed a convenient distance; each of these was surrounded by a vast number of persons; so great indeed was the number, that not half of the spectators could get near enough to hear a single word of what was said by the speakers on either side of the tribunes." "Precautions were taken to frustrate the efforts of persons hired to promote disorder at the meeting, for which purpose several thousand handbills were circulated in the numerous avenues leading to the place of meeting, and on the ground, recommending orderly and peaceable behaviour."

Another Address to the Nation was adopted, "the

"reading of which was from time to time interrupted with such loud applauses as are but seldom heard, even in public places."

"What is the cruel and insatiate monster that thus piecemeal tears and devours us? Wherefore, in the midst of apparent plenty, are we thus compelled to starve? Why, when we incessantly toil and labour must we pine in misery and want? What is this subtle and insinuating poison which thus vitiates our domestic comforts, and destroys our public prosperity? It is *Parliamentary Corruption* which, like a foaming whirlpool, swallows the fruit of all our labours, and leaves us only the dregs of bitterness and sorrow.

"Those whose duty it is to watch over the interests of the nation, have either proved themselves indifferent to its welfare, or unable to remove the pressure of these intolerable grievances. Let them, however, be aware in time. Let *them* look to the fatal consequences. *We* are sincere friends of Peace. We want only *Reform*, because we are firmly and fully convinced that a thorough Reform would effectually remedy these formidable evils; but we cannot answer for the strong and all-powerful impulse of necessity, nor always restrain the aggravated feelings of insulted human nature. IF EVER THE BRITISH NATION SHOULD LOUDLY DEMAND STRONG AND DECISIVE MEASURES, WE BOLDLY ANSWER, "WE HAVE LIVES! AND ARE READY TO DEVOTE THEM, EITHER SEPARATELY OR COLLECTIVELY, FOR THE SALVATION OF OUR COUNTRY."

This time a "Remonstrance" to the King was adopted, as their previous Address had not been attended to, again urging peace and Parliamentary reform, annual Parliaments, and universal suffrage. "Listen then, Sire, to the voice of a wearied and afflicted people, whose grievances are so various that they distract, so enormous

that they terrify. Think of the abyss between supplication and despair."

Several resolutions were also passed, one "That in order the more effectually to obtain the co-operation and assistance of the whole country, deputies shall be sent from the Society to the principal towns in the kingdom, for the purpose of explaining to our fellow-countrymen the necessity of associating, as the only means of procuring Parliamentary reform." Another, "That the only hope of the people is in themselves." Numerous speeches were made, and a little after five o'clock the meeting broke up, "when the immense company that was present separated and proceeded to their respective homes. The utmost harmony, regularity, and good order prevailed during the whole time, each and every individual seeming to be impressed with the idea that it was a day *sacred to liberty*."

It has been necessary to give at some length the description of these meetings, as they constitute the first Platform campaign by the civic industrial population of this country. The details are instructive, as showing both the spirit and the style of these earlier efforts at agitation by the Platform, and they enable us practically, I think, for the first time, to understand what it really was the Government had to deal with.

Three days after this meeting, Parliament was opened, and there was an enormous crowd to see the King going there in state to deliver the Royal Speech. He was violently hissed and hooted and groaned at; cries of "No war," "No Pitt," "No famine," "Peace, peace!" proceeded from some in the crowd; but no violence of any sort was offered until he arrived opposite the Ordnance Office, when a small pebble, or marble, or bullet, broke one of the windows of his carriage.

Later in the day he was again mobbed, but the Guards were speedily brought up, and he was enabled to proceed.

The occurrence sent a thrill of excitement through the country. The Ministers immediately threw the whole blame upon the Platform, and asserted that this attack on the King was the direct result of the meeting near Copenhagen House. A Proclamation was forthwith issued[1] against seditious and unlawful assemblies. "Whereas it hath been represented to us that immediately before the opening of the present Session of Parliament, a great number of persons were collected in the fields in the neighbourhood of the metropolis by advertisement and handbills, and that divers inflammatory discourses were delivered to the persons so collected; . . . and whereas such proceedings have been followed by acts of tumult and violence, and by daring and highly criminal outrages in direct violation of the public peace, to the immediate danger of our Royal Person, and to the interruption of our passage to and from our Parliament. And whereas great uneasiness and anxiety hath been produced in the minds of our faithful subjects by rumours and apprehensions that seditious and unlawful assemblies are intended to be held by evil-disposed persons, and that such other criminal practices as aforesaid are intended to be repeated.

"We do hereby enjoin and require all Justices of the Peace, Constables, etc. etc., to use the utmost diligence to discourage, prevent, and suppress all seditious and unlawful assemblies."

Proclamations, however, cannot alter or make laws, and as the existing laws were deemed insufficient to

[1] 4th November 1795, *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxii. p. 243.

check such proceedings, fresh legislation was an urgent necessity. Two Bills were therefore forthwith introduced into Parliament—one for the safety and preservation of his Majesty's person and Government against treasonable and seditious practices and attempts; the other for crushing the Platform and silencing free speech, or, as the Bill described itself, "for the more effectually preventing seditious meetings and assemblies."

The former was introduced into the House of Lords by Lord Grenville (Secretary of State), who said that "the late violent attack upon the person of his Majesty demanded some necessary measures for the prevention of a return of similar abuses, and that attack he suspected to have been made in consequence of the licentious proceedings which had of late been suffered without any notice or restriction. Indeed, the treasonable and seditious speeches and writings, which had of late been so assiduously disseminated at public meetings, together with the number of libels otherwise circulated, were so general and notorious, as most particularly to call for the interference of Parliament.[1]

"The dangerous doctrines held forth at such meetings tended to inflame the minds of the infatuated multitude. . . . If they were suffered to continue scattering firebrands where there was much combustible matter, their lordships and his Majesty's Ministers would have to answer to themselves and to their country for the effect that might follow."[2]

The measure he introduced need not have been noticed here were it not that part of it lent itself, in the hands of the Government, to a serious interference with freedom of speech and public discus-

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxii. p. 245. [2] *Ibid.* p. 262.

sion—the part which enacted that persons who should "maliciously and advisedly by writing, printing, preaching, or other speaking, express, publish, utter, or declare, any words or sentences to incite or stir up the people to hatred or contempt of the person of his Majesty, or the government and constitution of this realm, as by law established,"[1] should, on conviction, be liable to such punishment as might be inflicted in cases of high misdemeanour, and for a second offence should be liable to banishment or transportation for seven years.

The Bill "for the more effectually preventing seditious meetings and assemblies" was introduced into the House of Commons on the 10th of November by Pitt. From the moment the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act was taken off, he said, "All the plans of the Societies revived and continued in a progressive state till the meeting of Parliament."[2]

He contended that "they should adopt some means to prevent these seditious assemblies, which served as vehicles to faction and disloyalty, which fanned and kept alive the flame of disaffection, and filled the minds of the people with discontent. . . . His motion was directed to prevent those meetings, to which all the mischiefs he had mentioned were attributable.

"The meetings to which he alluded were of two descriptions—first, those meetings which, under a pretext (to which they by no means adhered) of petitioning Parliament for rights, of which they affected to be deprived, agitated questions, and promulgated opinions and insinuations hostile to the existing Government, and tending to bring it into disrepute with the people;

[1] See 36 Geo. III. cap. 7, sec. 2.

[2] *Parliamentary History*, 1795, vol. xxxii. p. 273.

second, those which, though less numerous, not less public, nor less dangerous, were concerted evidently for the purpose of disseminating unjust grounds of jealousy, discontent, and false complaints, against the Constitution; of irritating the minds of the people against their lawful governors, and encouraging them to acts of even treason itself. In these meetings everything that could create faction, everything that could excite disloyalty, everything that could prepare the mind of those who attended for rebellion, was industriously circulated. Both these required some strong law to prevent them; for if the arm of the executive government was not strengthened by such a law, they would be continued, if not to the utter ruin, certainly to the indelible disgrace of the country."

And then he continued in that peculiarly hypocritical style of speech which was so current among Ministers in those times—that of declaring that nothing would induce them to do a certain thing which they forthwith promptly proceeded to do. "As to the first of those descriptions of meetings," he said, "no one would venture to deny the right of the people to express their opinions on political men and measures, and to discuss and assert their right of petitioning all the branches of the Legislature; nor was there any one who would be further from encroaching on that right than himself. It was undoubtedly a most valuable privilege, of which nothing should deprive them. But if meetings of this kind were made the mere cover or the pretext for acts which were as inconsistent with the liberty of the subject as it was possible to imagine anything to be; if, instead of stating grievances, the people were excited to rebellion; if, instead of favouring the principles of freedom, the very foundation of it was to be destroyed, and

"with it the happiness of the people, it was high time for the Legislature to interpose with its authority.[1]

"Under the other description of meetings—meetings through which the minds of the people were poisoned — fell those of public lecturers, who made the dissemination of sedition the source of livelihood."

Ministers evidently thought it desirable to legislate comprehensively once they had an excuse, and to sweep away all the means whereby the lower orders, who gradually were increasing in numbers and rising into notice, could be instructed or influenced. It was not the first time these political lecturers or public debating societies had had attention called to them. Some three years previously the Lord Mayor of London had called the attention of Parliament to one in Cornhill, which held weekly meetings, at which some 600 to 700 people usually were present; but he was promptly covered with ridicule by Sheridan for thus noticing "a debating society, where principles of the most dangerous tendency were promulgated, where people went to buy treason at sixpence a head, where it was retailed to them by the glimmering of an inch of candle, and five minutes, measured by the glass, were allowed to each traitor to perform his part in overturning the State."[2]

The supply of such institutions came from the demand, and unless the people wished and wanted to have political instruction, lecturers and debating societies would not have been patronised by them.

The best known of these lecture and debating rooms was that kept by Thelwall, who had been tried for high treason and acquitted. Place gives an account of it, and

[1] *Parliamentary History*, 1795, vol. xxxii. p. 274.

[2] *Ibid.* vol. xxx. p. 530, December 1792.

of Thelwall. He says: "John Thelwall had in February 1795 reopened his lecture room, fitted up with benches so placed as to contain a great number of persons; the lectures were delivered in course twice a week; the price of admission was sixpence. The room was constantly crowded to excess. The lectures contained much loose declamation, they also contained many curious facts and statements, but nothing that could be called seditious or libellous. Thelwall entertained all the vulgar prejudices of the day, and inculcated the opinions before mentioned, namely, that all the evils and sufferings were due to the bad policy of the Government." [1]

These lectures were afterwards published by Thelwall,[2] and in the preface to the volume he states they were delivered to an audience averaging 430 persons in 1794, and 520 persons in 1795. With the shadow of the Act over him which would suppress his lecture room, he wrote: "When perseverance and honesty are opposed to powerful corruption, and when men of any intelligence are embarked in the public cause, so long as they are permitted to speak at all, they will find some means, even under the most severe, ambiguous, and iniquitous laws, to publish such truths, and propagate such sentiments, as will ultimately be fatal to their oppressors, without exposing themselves to the condemnation of an honest jury."

For convenience of arrangement it is as well to give at once the purport of the Seditious Meetings Bill as it became law. The first part of it dealt with public meetings; the second part with political lecturers and debating societies. Briefly stated, the Act required

[1] Place, MSS., 27,808, p. 36.

[2] See *The Tribune*, by J. Thelwall, p. vi. London, 1795.

that before any public meeting of more than fifty persons, which was not convened by the sheriff or other local authorities, could take place, notice must first be given by seven householders, and duly published, and copies of such notice sent to the local magistrates. This, so far, was not much of a restriction. But the Act further directed, and herein lay the sting of the measure, the attendance of the magistrate, who was given very wide and summary powers of stopping a speech, of arresting the speaker, and of dispersing the meeting; and a defiance of his orders was made felony, rendering the offender subject to the terrible penalty of death.

It is, however, worth giving the more material portions of the Act in its own words. After a preamble, saying: "WHEREAS assemblies of divers persons, collected for the purpose, or under the pretext, of deliberating on public grievances, and of agreeing on Petitions, complaints, remonstrances, declarations, or other addresses to the King or Parliament, have of late been made use of to serve the ends of factious and seditious persons, to the great danger of the public peace, and may become the means of producing confusion and calamities in the nation," it enacted, "That no meeting of any description of persons, exceeding the number of fifty persons (other than and except county or borough meetings duly convened by the sheriff, or other local authority) shall be holden, for the purpose, or on the pretext, of considering of or preparing any Petition, complaint, or other address to the King, or Parliament, for alteration of matters established in Church or State," [1] unless full notice be given in some newspaper, signed by at least seven householders of the district, and sent to the clerk of the peace, who shall send a copy to "three

[1] See Act 36 Geo. III. cap. 8, 18th December 1795.

magistrates at least." If this were not done the meeting would be deemed, and taken to be, an unlawful assembly (section 3).

And it was further enacted (section 6) that if more than fifty persons assembled contrary to the provisions of the Act, or if at any meeting which was assembled, after all the formalities required by the Act had been duly complied with, anything was propounded or deliberated on which should purport "that any matter or thing by law established may be altered otherwise than by the authority of the King, Lords, and Commons, in Parliament assembled," or should "tend to incite or stir up the people to hatred or contempt of the person of his Majesty, his heirs or successors, or of the Government and Constitution of this realm, as by law established," it should be lawful for one or more justices of the peace, by proclamation in the King's name, to require or command the persons there assembled to disperse themselves, and peaceably depart to their habitations, or to their lawful business; and if any persons, "to the number of twelve or more, remain or continue together by the space of one hour, after such command or request is made by proclamation, then such continuing together shall be adjudged felony, and the offenders shall be adjudged felons, and shall suffer death, as in cases of felony, without benefit of clergy." Magistrates were authorised and empowered, on receiving a notice of the meeting, to resort to the meeting, and so comically extreme was the anxiety of Parliament that the magistrates should be at the meeting, that it was enacted (see section 10) that any one who prevented any magistrate "going to attend such meeting" might, on conviction, "suffer death" without benefit of clergy.

Once there, any one justice was given practically despotic power for the suppression of free speech, or discussion, for the Act enacted that if "He shall think fit to order any person who shall at such meeting propound or maintain any proposition for altering anything by law established, otherwise than by the authority of King, Lords, and Commons, in Parliament assembled, or shall wilfully and advisedly make any proposition, or hold any discourse for the purpose of inciting and stirring up the people to hatred and contempt of his Majesty, or the Government or Constitution of this realm as by law established, to be taken into custody, to be dealt with according to law;" and if any obstruction to the order were made, he could direct the dispersal of the meeting, and non-obedience rendered the offender liable to the penalty of death without benefit of clergy; and if, in the course of dispersing any meeting after proclamation, any one was hurt, maimed, or even killed, the magistrates, or peace officers, were completely indemnified.

Thus mild was the law in those days—a law which in many respects was a revival of the sanguinary code of Mary. Thus cruel were still the statesmen of England at the latter end of the eighteenth century—Pitt, Dundas, Wilberforce.

This, however, did not quite complete the measures for the repression of free speech.

Section 12 dealt with lecture rooms and debating societies:[1] "Whereas certain houses, rooms, or places have of late been frequently used for the purpose of delivering lectures and discourses on and concerning

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxii. p. 380. Sheridan, in a speech on the 16th November 1795, taunts Pitt with having assiduously attended debating societies, and with having "lent a helping hand to the institution of one of them, the Lyceum, in the Strand, and having spoken in a mask at them."

certain supposed public grievances and matters relating to the Laws, Constitution, and Government, and Policy of these Kingdoms, and treating and debating on and concerning the same, and under pretence thereof lectures or discourses have been delivered, and debates held, tending to stir up hatred and contempt of his Majesty's royal person and of the Government of the realm as by law established," it was enacted that all such houses for admission to which a charge was made, should, unless previously licensed by two magistrates, be deemed to be disorderly houses, and the persons allowing the meeting or lectures, or taking any part in the same, were made liable to heavy pecuniary penalties. Even in a licensed house a magistrate was to have the right of admission whenever he chose.

The Act was to continue in force for three years, and until the end of the then next session of Parliament, that is to say, till well on in 1799.

These Bills met with a storm of disapprobation both inside and outside Parliament. From the 6th November, when Lord Grenville gave notice of the intentions of the Government on the subject, down to the middle of December, when the Bills were read a third time and passed, the contest raged hot and furious.

Fox led the Opposition in the House of Commons.[1]

"The proposal struck him with horror. Its essence was detestable. The people, he had always thought, had a right to discuss the topics from which their grievances arose. In all instances they had a right to complain by petition, and to remonstrate to either House of Parliament, or, if they pleased, to the King exclusively; but now it seems they are not to do so, unless notice be given to a magistrate that he may

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxii. p. 277.

"become a witness of their proceedings. There were to be witnesses of every word that every man spoke. This magistrate, this jealous witness, was to form his opinion on the propriety of the proceedings; and if he should think that anything that was said had a tendency to sedition, he had power to arrest the man who uttered it. Not only so, he had power to dissolve the meeting at his own will." . . . And then, after describing a meeting where a magistrate exercised this power, he said: "I ask if this can be called a meeting of free people? Did ever a free people meet so? Did ever a free State exist so? Did any man ever hypothetically state the possibility of the existence of Freedom under such restrictions? Good God Almighty, sir! is it possible that the feelings of the people of this country should be thus insulted? Is it possible to make the people of this country believe that this plan is anything but a total annihilation of their liberty? . . .

"We have seen and we have heard of revolutions in different States. Were they owing to freedom of popular opinions? Were they owing to the facility of popular meetings? No, sir; they were owing to the reverse of these. . . .

"It has been the characteristic blessing of our Constitution that it admitted of various ways in which the opinions of the public, nay, if you please, in which the *ill* opinions, the prejudices, and the ill humours of the body politic may have vent. And if their grievances be true, they may be redressed; if the allegation of them be false, the evil effects of their persisting in complaint may be prevented; but if you take away their hitherto well-known and legal method of stating their disapprobation of the measures of Government, you bring the best part of the Constitution of this country upon

a level with the most despotic; you bring the people of this country to the terrible situation of those who have no alternative between a total and abject submission to the tyrannical Acts of Government, and a remedy by violence and force of arms. . . .

"If you prevent discussion, if you stop up this vent for the humour of the body politic, there can be no alternative between abject submission and violent resistance."

In another speech (16th November) he said: "You may prevent men from complaining, but you cannot prevent them from feeling."

In another (25th November) he dwelt on the grand effects of freedom of speech. "By the passing of the Bill the people would have lost, it was said, a great deal. A great deal—ay, all that is worth preserving. For you will have lost the spirit, the fire, the freedom, the boldness, the energy of the British character, and with them its best virtue. I say it is not the written law of the Constitution of England; it is not the law that is to be found in books that has constituted the true principle of freedom in any country at any time. No; it is the energy, the boldness of a man's mind, which prompts him to speak, not in private, but in large and popular assemblies, that constitutes, that creates in a State, the spirit of freedom. This is the principle which gives life to liberty; without it the human character is a stranger to freedom. . . .

"How did we rise into our eminence? By the written law? No. By the boldness of the English character arising out of the freedom of speech. This is the principle which led you on to fame. Take away the freedom of speech or of writing, and the foundation of all your freedom is gone."[1]

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxii. p. 420.

The centre of the fight raged around the clauses directing the attendance of a magistrate or magistrates at the meeting, and the giving a single magistrate power to order the meeting to disperse, or to order the arrest of a speaker. The provision was nothing less than the establishment of a censorship of the Platform, of the very worst character. No Government even then would have dared to propose a censorship of the Press. The Platform, however, was not yet so powerful but that at least the attempt might be made so far as it was concerned. It was true that certain conditions were laid down before the magistrate was justified in interfering, but they were so very wide that, practically, people had no safeguard against the violence of some hotheaded partisan magistrate, who, as Grey expressed it, "by a tyrannical and capricious mandate, might frustrate every purpose for which a meeting was called."

Woodward, in one of his humorous sketches, entitled "Liberty of Speech," has admirably represented the state of the case. A trembling-looking orator is depicted standing on a stump of a tree, while a fierce-looking bully, grasping a heavy bludgeon, says to him: "Go on. Speak your mind freely. Tell all your grievances, but if you don't stop when I tell you, I'll knock you down."

Fox did not exaggerate when he said: "For instance, were he in a public meeting to state coolly and dispassionately the inadequacy of our representation, and the disproportionate influence of 'Old Sarum' to some large and populous towns in choosing their representatives, he might be taken up for sedition, a justice or magistrate might dissolve the meeting, and on their refusing to disperse, he might call on the military to murder them."

Opposition in the House of Lords was restricted to the few Liberal peers still left, who made a strong protest against both the Bills. The Duke of Bedford pointed out that "Such attempts might silence the voice of complaint, but they cannot reach the mind, which will brood over the injustice; they may restrain and fetter the actions of men, but cannot make them love the Constitution or reconcile them to the Government."

The best speech was made by Lord Thurlow. He, too, dwelt on the novel addition to the power of magistrates, and said that if the words whereby magistrates were given the power of taking all persons into custody who should hold any discourse for the purpose of "inciting or stirring up the people to hatred or contempt of the Government and Constitution of the realm" were allowed to stand in the Bill, "there was an end at once of all discussion with a view to Parliamentary reform."[1]

"How was it possible, in agitating the question of Parliamentary reform, to forbear mentioning the inequality in point of importance, inhabitants, etc. etc., between the county of Yorkshire and the borough of Old Sarum without derision and ridicule, which might, by an ignorant magistrate, be construed to 'incite to hatred and contempt of the Government and Constitution as by law established,' and, acting upon that misconstruction, he might take the party into custody, and dissolve the meeting." . . .

All in vain, however, was any opposition. Just as surely as a stone thrown into the air will fall to the earth again, so sure was a Bill once introduced by the Government in those times to be carried through both

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxii. p. 540.

Houses of Parliament. To such small numbers had the defenders of freedom of meeting and speech dwindled down that only forty-two members voted against leave to introduce the Bill into the House of Commons. Pitt himself defended it and supported it with all sorts of arguments and pleas. He denied that the Bill abridged or limited the right of petitioning Parliament, "the channel through which Petitions usually came being left open"; but though the channel may have been left open, as a matter of fact it was so commanded that nothing could pass through except by permission.

He appealed to the fears of the House: "Was it possible for the House not to have felt the danger of some late meetings, and did they not feel the necessity of checking them? If they did not, he would only say that this was not the time to trifle; if they did not seize the opportunity of applying a preventive, they might soon lose the power of exercising their own functions in that House. For this reason it was highly necessary to grant new discretionary powers to magistrates to disperse meetings.[1] . . . In fine, the sole object of the Bill was, that the people should look to Parliament, and to Parliament alone, for the redress of such grievances as they might have to complain of, with a confident reliance of relief being afforded them, if their complaints should be well founded and practically remediable. That it should be understood that the condition of no man was so abject but he could find a legal means of bringing his grievances before his representatives in Parliament, and subject them to their consideration; but that he would not leave a door open, through which a torrent might rush in, and overwhelm the Constitution." He was vigorously supported

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxii. p. 361.

by his party, even Wilberforce—he who was leading a lifelong struggle against slavery in foreign countries—sided with the Government in enforcing the slavery of silence in this. He said: "For the last three years attempts had been making by every species of art and industry to poison the minds of the people of this country, to instil into them jealousies and suspicions, and to excite a contempt for the British Constitution. . . . Various means had been taken to put a stop to these proceedings, but in vain. . . . Lectures were given, and harangues delivered, of the most seditious and inflammatory nature; handbills and prints of the most atrocious description were circulated. . . . What then was to be done? Were they to be permitted to pursue in all our great manufacturing towns what they had begun in more than one of them, that same system of popular assemblies, and debating clubs, and seditious harangues which they had introduced into the capital? Surely it was high time for Parliament to interfere in order to stop this growing mischief."[1]

One Government supporter thought that the liberty of the Press, which would continue to exist in all its force, afforded "a mode of discussing all popular and political topics that he thought adequate to all the purposes of the community."

Another said: "The only question now was whether the Bill was sufficient to meet the exigency of the occasion."

These extracts are sufficient. There runs throughout the whole debates a vein of alarm and panic plainly discernible. But there is also very plainly apparent a determination on the part of the Government and its followers and dependents to exaggerate and make the

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxii. p. 292.

most of the meetings and speeches, and to turn them to account as a justification for the enactment of such measures as would prop up and give a new lease of life to the influence of the Crown, by which so many people so largely profited, and to the maintenance of that system of Government which vested the whole authority and resources of the State in the hands of the Crown and of a limited number of the aristocracy and upper classes.

What else can account for the ridiculous exaggeration of the Attorney-General that "he was persuaded that the very existence of the country was at stake?" What else can account for Dundas appealing to the reminiscences of the Gordon riots in 1780 as an argument for the Government Bills: "Since they had experienced such a lamentable instance of the dangers resulting from popular meetings, since they had seen the evils which threatened the Constitution from such combinations, would they hesitate to pass the Bill?" What else was the meaning of the indictments, the year before, for the highest crime, high treason, when a conviction could easily have been secured on a less serious charge? The panic of the French Revolution was still upon them; the to them awful example that a people could change or modify its own Government was before their eyes; and accordingly a demand for reform was exaggerated into revolution, and a claim for equal laws was interpreted, or wilfully misinterpreted, as an attempt to effect equality of ranks and a division of property. Fox laid down a great principle when he said: "In great meetings he always conceived that their ostensible object was their real object, because it was impossible to bring 20,000 to 30,000 persons to practice dissimulation in unison."[1]

[1] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxii. p. 462.

But neither the Government nor any of their hangers-on would ever accept the avowed and declared object of Parliamentary reform as the real one; and to whole classes were imputed what the most foolish and criminal had said or done. With a Government and a Parliamentary majority in this temper, argument, reason, nothing was of avail to turn them from their purpose.

The real injustice of the Government was attributing all the existing discontent to the meetings. There were other causes which they steadily ignored. The summer of 1795 had been cold and wet, and there was a scanty harvest. The price of wheat, which had been fifty-eight shillings a quarter in February, rose in August to one hundred and eight shillings, and though it fell again in September, it was still seventy-eight shillings. The lower classes were in a state of great privation, and there had been many tumults for bread. There was the heavy pressure too of the war taxes, and it was plain the real roots of the popular disaffection were, first and mainly, the high prices of provisions, and next the pressure of the taxes. Moreover, with some, the war was intensely unpopular, being regarded as an attempt on the part of the Government to reinstate the despicable Bourbon tyrants on the throne of France, and to subject the people of France to their infamous rule. But it was unpopular too, because the lower classes felt that as long as it lasted, they could hope for little amelioration in their material condition.

Parliament, however, was no longer the only place where opposition could be made to objectionable legislative proposals. The Platform had come into existence, and henceforth Governments would have to submit to

their proposals being discussed outside Parliament as well as inside. On this occasion the opposition in Parliament to the two Bills was as nothing to the opposition outside. "The agitation throughout the country was extreme."[1] *The Annual Register*, writing contemporaneously, said,[2] "The public was no less occupied than Parliament itself, in the discussion of the two Bills pending in both Houses. The novelty of the measures proposed, their inimical tendency to the long-established usages of the nation, their direct aim at its liberty, and the daringness of Ministers in bringing forward so undeniable an infringement of rights that had been respected by all preceding administrations: these combined motives excited an alarm, which was felt in every part of the nation. . . .

"Meetings and consultations, both private and public, were held everywhere. Clubs and associations were formed for the purpose of opposing the Bills by every method not liable to the cognisance of the law. Never had there appeared, in the memory of the oldest man, so firm and decided a plurality of adversaries to the ministerial measures as on this occasion; the interest of the public seemed so deeply at stake, that individuals, not only of the decent, but of the most vulgar professions, gave up a considerable portion of their time and occupations in attending the numerous meetings that were called in every part of the kingdom, to the professed intent of counteracting this attempt of the Ministry."

The Whig Club held a special meeting on the 10th November, nearly fifty lords and members of the House of Commons being at it. The Duke of Bedford, who presided, said, "The Bills were a direct attack on the

[1] Place, MSS., 27,808, p. 55. [2] *Annual Register*, 1796, p. 38.

freedom of the Press and of Speech—on all the rights of popular discussion and even on the sacred right of petition."[1] Fox said there ought to be meetings everywhere, and a resolution was passed that meetings of the people in their respective districts should be immediately called for the purpose of petitioning Parliament against the Bill. The London Corresponding Society promptly convened a meeting, which was held on the 12th of November in the field near Copenhagen House.[2]

The meeting was to have commenced business at eleven o'clock in the forenoon, but the immense crowds which were seen approaching from all directions induced postponement of the business till half-past twelve, when J. Ashley, R. Hodgson, and J. Thelwall, from the three tribunes or Platforms which had been erected, explained the mode of proceeding. It was proposed to pursue exactly the same course at each place, and as nearly as possible at the same time, so that there should, in fact, be three distinct meetings for the one purpose. The mode of voting recommended was this: After a Resolution or a Petition was read, the question was to be put in the affirmative by the holding up of a white handkerchief on the rostrum, the negative by holding up a hat. "Citizen" William Duane was appointed chairman, and at one o'clock, on a signal made by him, the real business of the day began at each of the platforms.[3]

An Address, Remonstrance, and Petition to the King was adopted. The petitioners complained that "instead of redress, we have met with calumny; instead of alleviation of existing oppressions, we are threatened with the total extinction of our yet remaining liberties.

[1] *The History of the Two Acts*, p. 120.
[2] *Ibid.* p. 125.
[3] Place, MSS., 12th November 1795 27,808, p. 54.

"Parliamentary corruption and an unjust and ruinous war have reduced us to beggary and famine; and when we call for the reformation of the one, and the relinquishment of the other, Bills are brought into Parliament by your Majesty's Ministers, which make it felony and high treason to give a tongue to those miseries we cannot but feel.

And he was asked to tell his Ministers "to turn their attention to the redress of existing abuses instead of laying additional burthens and restrictions upon his already oppressed and unhappy people."

A Petition to the Lords, and another of "nearly 400,000 Britons" to the House of Commons, were agreed to, and several resolutions were passed.

"'Citizen' Jones addressed the meeting in a most impressive manner. He began by a solemn appeal to the meeting on the momentous occasion which had called them together, by calling to their recollection that they were then met to petition the Legislature against the passing of an Act which, if once become a law, would totally annihilate every grand and essential privilege which, as Englishmen, they had hitherto prided themselves on possessing. He repudiated any connection of their Society with the recent outrage on the King; and dared any one to deny, if they could, that the Society had uniformly exerted its efforts in support of the people's rights, in a manner which held forth a pattern to every one, for peace, order, and decorum. It was by a strict adherence to these modes alone, he said, that the friends of freedom and reform could ever hope to carry the great and important question for which they contended. He conjured the meeting to reflect that everything dear to man was now at stake. . . . He declared that he hoped to see the day when the Minis-

ters who had advised such arbitrary measures against the long established rights and privileges of the people, would answer for it with their heads.[1]

"Several other citizens spoke with considerable force and energy," and then "this astonishingly numerous assembly separated in the most cheerful manner, and evinced, beyond a possibility of doubt, that thousands of men may and can meet in so glorious and exalted a cause as that of their dearest rights and privileges, however their indignation may be aroused against those who attack them, and still preserve their temper when patience is necessary."

Place, who was of course there observing everything, says: "I remained on one of the platforms after the business was concluded, and saw the people disperse in the most orderly and quiet manner. In half an hour not one was to be seen in any of the surrounding fields. The meeting, as is usual on such occasions, was attended by men, women, and children."

On the 16th November, a few days after this great meeting, another great meeting assembled in the Palace Yard, Westminster, some 10,000 to 12,000 people being at it. Fox was chairman. He opened the proceedings of the day, and made something more than what Horace Walpole had once called "a warm speech."[2] "A daring attempt has been made upon your liberties," he said; "an attempt to subvert the Constitution of England. The Bills are intended to complete the overthrow of the liberties of the people of England. The Bill of Rights is proposed to be finally repealed that you shall be deprived of the right of petitioning; the people of England are forbidden expressly from even discussing the conduct of their rulers."

[1] *The History of the Two Acts*, p. 133.

[2] *Ibid.* p. 232.

The Duke of Bedford then spoke. Grey read the proposed Petition, "which was highly approved of." Lord Hood, the other member for Westminster, spoke against the Petition, and was quietly listened to. His speech afforded Sheridan the opportunity of a speech which was followed by "prodigious applause," and then, after the adoption of an Address to the King, congratulating him on his escape, the meeting came to an end. A contemporary newspaper thus describes the general demeanour of the meeting:

"We never witnessed a meeting of near 10,000 or 12,000 men where order, regularity, and decorum were more perfectly observed. The effect of this conduct in a multitude that spread in every direction as far as the eye could reach was truly impressive. When they held up their hands to signify their approbation, nothing could be more interesting than the sight. The sky was rent with the acclamation of their consent, and having thus expressed their feelings upon every question as it was put, they returned again to the same attentive silence, which they maintained while every one of the noble and honourable persons who addressed them were speaking." [1]

The Platform was active now in such a way as had never before been witnessed. Meetings were held in a large number of places against the Bills. Meetings were held also in favour of the Bills. Some meetings were held of persons both for and against the Bills, where warm discussions ensued, and the majority carried the day. Thus, in one way or another, the subject was being discussed by the public to an extent that hitherto no other question had ever been discussed; and the greater part of the discussion was carried on by

[1] *The History of the Two Acts*, p. 239.

means of the Platform. If the Platform was in the end to be suppressed, it certainly was having an active time before extinction.

The Livery of London met and "instructed" their members to vote against the Bills. A large number of counties, and almost every town of note in the kingdom, held meetings, and agreed to Remonstrances or Petitions. For a period of nearly six weeks the country was in a Platform ferment, and Petition after Petition was presented to the Houses of Parliament, giving rise there to constantly renewed debates.[1]

Even Edinburgh, where a rampant Toryism kept down with its iron hoof every stirring of Liberalism, added a voice to the general outcry.

A meeting was held in the Circus, "which their inexperience at that time of such assemblages had made them neglect to take any means to light; and Henry Erskine was obliged to begin his speech in the dark. A lad, however, struggled through the crowd with a dirty tallow candle in his hand, which he held up during the rest of the address before the orator's face.[2]

It is a remarkable testimony to the appreciation of the value of the Platform as an instrument for the expression of public opinion, that at the same time that Ministers and their dependents were inveighing and legislating against meetings and public discussions, they were themselves encouraging them for their own ends. Whilst the Seditious Meetings Bill was under discussion in Parliament, meeting after meeting was organised, and address on address, petition on petition, presented to the King, and to both Houses of Parliament, full of

[1] It is said that 65 Petitions for the Bills, with about 30,000 signatures, were presented; and 94 Petitions against the Bills, with over 130,000 signatures.—See *History of Two Acts*, pp. 826, 827.

[2] See *Life of Lord Jeffrey*, by Lord Cockburn, p. 208.

abhorrence of public meetings, and denunciations of public speeches. In utter oblivion that they owed their liberties to the power of free discussion, here were large numbers of men inveighing against the practice which they themselves were indulging in, and urging its suppression. The King and Parliament were besought by one place to "repress, prevent, and punish these hitherto unheard-of enormities"; by another, "that these seditious and tumultuous meetings, tending evidently to anarchy and confusion, may be effectually suppressed"; by another to stop these meetings, "which are the fountain from which the most alarming and calamitous evils are likely to proceed"; by another, "to suppress those unlawful assemblies and seminaries of anarchy"; by another, "to suppress those tumultuous and illegal meetings where the sacred name of liberty is used only as a cloak of maliciousness, and where the preachers of sedition conceal from the deluded multitude their designs of subverting the Constitution under the specious pretence of reforming it"; from another, "whose hearts shrink from those wicked and atrocious principles hatched by the zealots of confusion to subvert the peace of society and all good government"; from another, "to prevent those seditious meetings and assemblies in which we trace the source and origin of every danger which threatens your Majesty and the nation."[1]

The climax of the virulence and acrimony rampant at this time against every one connected with the popular cause is to be found in the "form of prayer and thanksgiving to Almighty God," composed by the dignitaries of the State Church, for the escape of the King, in which

[1] It is stated that the 579 addresses were sent to the King—363 of congratulation, and 216 approving of the Bills. —See *History of the Two Acts*, p. 822.

the people were told by their Church to pray in these words:

"Cloath his enemies with shame, bring to light their conspiracies, and disappoint their treasons. Touch them, O merciful God, with remorse. Give them grace to see and abhor the sinfulness of their ways, and the madness of their counsels. But if they still harden their hearts, and are incorrigible in their wickedness, let them perish by Thy just judgments, that others, by the example of their punishment, may take warning. . . . These things we humbly beg, O merciful God," [1] etc. etc.

When we remember that whole classes of the people who were agitating for reform, or even dared to affirm that the House of Commons ought to be reformed, were habitually stigmatised as "enemies" of their country, and of the King and Constitution,[2] and when we see the Church thus calling upon its members to pray to God that they might perish by His just judgments, we have a flood of light poured upon the acrimonious spirit of the times, and can understand better the vehemence of the cry raised by some for the suppression of public meetings.

While ready enough to approve of Petitions in favour of their policy, the Government could not conceal their wrath when the Petitions came pouring in against it.

Several Government supporters maintained that the Petitions against the Bills had been obtained by the

[1] *History of the Two Acts*, p. 196.

[2] See a Speech of Erskine's at the Whig Club, 19th December 1795: "It had been the fashion of late to consider every man who talked of liberty, and who presumed to think and act with the free spirit of our fathers, as a Jacobin, a Democrat, a Republican, and to tax every man as a seeker of anarchy and confusion because he sought for the free and pure administration of the Constitution."

grossest calumnies and the foulest misrepresentations, and Pitt said: "They should inquire how far these Petitions had been obtained by calumny, by fraud, by artifice, and by shameful and scandalous misrepresentations."

The London Corresponding Society had certainly given cause for criticism. Their Petition of the 21st November was said to be from 400,000; it was presented to Parliament on the 23d, and it was found to be signed by 12,113. But Pitt was still more wroth with people who moved people to petition. He said: "He must remark that he did not consider those to be the best friends of the Constitution, or the lower ranks of the people, who were always goading them to bring forward Petitions, and encouraging the agitation and discussion of public affairs, among those, too, who, of all men, from their education, their habits of life, and their means of information, were indisputably the least capable of exercising sound judgment on such topics."

Dundas also inveighed against meetings. "The great patriots of 1688 were accustomed to look for the safeguard of their liberties, their property, and their religion, only from the energy and wisdom of Parliament; whereas the modern doctrine was, that every good was to be expected from popular assemblies."

Opposition to the Bills was useless. Out of doors once more the London Corresponding Society organised a huge meeting in St. Marylebone Fields, but they might as well have addressed their Petition to the Sphinx in the desert of Egypt as to "the King's most excellent Majesty." In Parliament the Government had such a majority that they could do what they pleased; and so, in a short time, both Bills duly passed

both Houses of Parliament, received the royal assent, and became law.[1]

The Government, having delivered these two tremendous blows against the Platform, contented itself with waiting to see the effects.

They proved efficacious. The Seditious Meetings Act was instantaneously effective against meetings out of doors as well as against public lectures indoors. Early in March 1796 the London Corresponding Society tried to evade the Act by sending Deputies to address meetings of under fifty persons, but their deputies—John Binns and John Gale Jones—were arrested at Birmingham, and some little time after were tried on a charge of using seditious words. Binns was acquitted, but Jones was convicted, and so that plan fell through. In July 1796 the Society ventured on announcing a public meeting, and attempted to hold it, but the magistrates and police promptly interfered, and put an end to it, and some of the most prominent men were arrested.[2]

"After this," says Place, "the Society continued gradually to decline, and by the end of the year it was in a very low state. The reformers," he continues, "generally conceived it not only dangerous, but useless to continue to exert themselves any longer. The Society rapidly declined; it failed to raise money enough to meet its expenses; it was nearly ruined before it was finally suppressed by Act of Parliament."

[1] One remarkable effect of the Seditious Meetings was not pointed out till long after, namely, that "either from inadvertence or yielding in a certain degree to the temper or the habits of the times, it first admitted a wider range of general deliberative capacity, to be exercised by popular assemblies.

"An authority was recognised in various public persons or bodies to call together public meetings for the purpose of, or on the pretext (a purpose and a pretext which, unaccompanied with a direct intention of petition or address, was unheard-of in any previous Act of Parliament) of deliberating upon any grievance in Church or State."—See Carrington's *Inquiry, etc.*

[2] Place, MSS., 27,808, p. 80.

In 1796 a general election once more gave life to the Platform. The coercive legislation just referred to did not apply to it at such times. No special question came before the electors; with the whole machinery of electoral force so secure in the hands of the Government, no great change could show itself in the results, and accordingly the general election left the Government and the Opposition in very much the same relative position as they were previous to it. Pitt, however, claimed that the approbation given by those who had been members of the last Parliament at the commencement and prosecution of the war were powerful recommendations in their favour at the last general election.

Seven contests took place in counties and forty-nine in boroughs. Though ineffective as regarded any actual change in the distribution of power, they served to give a keen interest to this one function of political life, which every now and then brought politics more closely home to at least a section of the people. Elections then were too frequently a saturnalia of bribery, corruption, drunkenness, and violence, but in spite of all these vices, they, and free speech in Parliament, were the life-blood of liberty in these times. Fox again contested Westminster, and availed himself of the occasion both to defend himself and to attack the Government.

"I cannot but observe that Ministers are very fond of charging their opponents with using inflammatory language. But if they reduce the country to such a situation, that to speak the truth is to inflame, the fault is in them, and not in those who expose them. I do not wish to inflame the public mind, but I wish the public to be informed."

The elections over, silence settled down on the

Platform, and once in a way only was that silence broken. Thus, on the 24th January 1798, there was a great public dinner at the Crown and Anchor in celebration of Fox's birthday. At least 2000 attended, speeches were made, and a toast drank—"Our Sovereign's health, the Majesty of the people." And again, in May, Fox delivered a strong speech at the Whig Club, but these were isolated instances of the use of the Platform, serving mostly to accentuate the silence that had been imposed on the land. "The years 1797-1800 were years of terror," wrote Place: "A disloyal word was enough to bring down punishment on any man's head."

In April 1798 the Government again obtained from Parliament the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act.[1] This time it was not the Platform that was the cause.

A royal message was brought to the House of Commons from the King stating the advices he had received of great preparations by the French for invading his Majesty's dominions, and "that in this design the enemy was encouraged by the correspondence and communication of traitorous and disaffected persons and Societies of these kingdoms."[2]

In April 1799 Pitt again moved for the continuance of the suspension, but as even this was not in his opinion sufficient to check the action of the Societies, he also introduced a Bill for their suppression. He said: "We

[1] Sir Erskine May, in his *Constitutional History*, has fallen into a rather serious inaccurracy on this subject. He says (vol. ii. p. 126) that the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act was in continuous operation for eight years. This is not so. The Act was suspended from 23d May 1794 to 1st July 1795, and then the suspension was allowed to expire. It was not again suspended until the 21st of April 1798 (see 38 Geo. III., cap. 36); thus there was a period of almost three years during which it was not suspended. The suspension again expired early in 1801. A few months, however, only passed before it was again suspended (18th April 1801), which suspension lasted till near the end of 1801.

[2] *Parliamentary History*, vol. xxxiii. p. 1422.

"are involved in a contest for every consideration that is most valuable to us, and it is our duty to make provisions suited to the case from time to time. In taking this general view of the question, it is therefore our great and leading object to prevent the existence of those Societies, as detailed in the Report of the Secret Committee, Societies having but one common end—the subversion of the Constitution, and the diffusion of the principles of anarchy."[1] This was the first object of his proposed measure; the second was "to prevent the existence of other Societies which are evidently calculated to corrupt the morals and vitiate the understanding of the community. I mean debating Societies, in which questions are agitated little suited to the capacity of the audience, and which operate to loosen the foundations of morality, religion, and social happiness. In a former session measures were adopted to prevent the delivery of political lectures, but attempts have been made to elude them by delivering historical lectures, which, by misrepresentation and the force of erroneous inference, are rendered equally dangerous. With this view, it is intended to extend the proposed provision to all Societies where money is taken for admission, and that none shall be held unless licensed by a magistrate, and liable to his inspection."

The suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act was continued, and an Act passed by which the Societies of United Englishmen, United Britons, United Scotsmen, United Irishmen, and the London Corresponding Society were suppressed by name, and all other Societies were declared unlawful, of which the members were required to take any oath not required by law.[2]

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxiv. p. 985, 19th April 1799.

[2] 29 Geo. III., cap. 79, 12th July 1799.

But a more deadly, an almost finishing blow was struck against the Platform by another part of the Act. Unorganised, the power of the Platform was not, could not be very great, but the association of persons added strength to it, and the association of bodies or societies rendered it at once formidable. Pitt, who in his youth had been behind the scenes of agitation, knew this well, and, now that he was opposed to the Platform, turned his knowledge to account. He devised a law which practically prevented the possibility of any organisation.

He proposed to Parliament, and Parliament humbly acted on his proposal, that any Society which should act in separate or distinct branches should "be deemed and taken to be an unlawful combination and confederacy"; and any persons maintaining correspondence or intercourse with it should be deemed guilty of an unlawful combination and confederacy—the penalty for which was seven years' transportation.

Thus a most formidable restriction was placed on the power of the Platform, and, differing from the other restrictions which were temporary or only for a limited time, it was made perpetual.

Possessed of these powers the Government allowed the Seditious Meetings Act to expire. Early in 1801 the suspension of the Habeas Corpus also expired. A revival of the practice of holding meetings at once began, and the Government was once more stirred to action.

On the 1st April sealed papers were presented to the House of Commons, and a Secret Committee appointed. They reported that the previous Acts (Habeas Corpus, and Seditious Meetings) having expired, the disaffected had been endeavouring to take advantage of the distress occasioned by the high price of provisions

for carrying their wicked design into effect. "And it appears to be in agitation suddenly to call numerous meetings in different parts of the country, at the same day and hour, to an extent which, if not prevented, must materially endanger the public peace."[1]

The Committee recommended the renewal of the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, and of the Act to prevent Seditious Meetings, "which, while they remained in force, were attended with the happiest effects in the preserving of the public tranquillity."

This was accordingly done, done at such speed, that the Act suspending the Habeas Corpus Act was passed then and there in one sitting, and the Seditious Meetings Act within a week.[2] The former was suspended till six weeks after the end of the next session of Parliament; the latter was to be in force for the same period.

Thus was legislation against the Platform complete. The Seditious Meetings Act, the Corresponding Societies Act of 1799, and the Suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act were all in force simultaneously, and the Platform at last effectually silenced.

Here, then, may be considered as ending the first period in the history of the Platform. The germs long lying deep in English character, institutions, and freedom of mind, had fertilised into life. The Platform had come into being; it had given evidence of its

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, 1801, vol. xxxv. p. 1275.

[2] This is a most curious case of legislation, namely, reviving an expired Act by one section, instead of re-enacting the whole measure. The Seditious Meetings Act of 1795 was a long one, consisting of 23 sections, some of them of considerable length. The reviving Act (41 Geo. III., cap. 40, 30th April 1801), after a Preamble mentioning the Act of 1795, said: "Be it enacted, etc., that the said Act, and all the provisions therein contained shall from and after the passing of this Act be revived, and the same is hereby revived and shall continue in full force and effect until six weeks after the commencement of the next session of Parliament."

existence; it had reared its head; it had given occasional proof of power. The more farseeing members of the Government had perceived the tremendous power in the State which free speech at public meetings might become, and with the excuse afforded by the extreme and injudicious action of some of the members of the Societies, and of violent reckless men, it had been struck down by the Government of the day, wounded sorely, almost to the death.

It is a convenient place, therefore, for very briefly reviewing its history so far.

Its growing power—that is, the reflection which first strikes one.

Step by step it had been gaining strength, and each step had disclosed some new, some different, phase.

The first effort of a few counties, irritated by the imposition of an unpopular tax, was but a small affair either in power or significance when compared with the later demonstrations.

A greater, its first great struggle, was, when the popular rights were "betrayed" by the House of Commons in the case of the Middlesex election. That was the first occasion when any considerable number of the people used the Platform for the expression of their feelings. That some of them were incited to it by the Parliamentary leaders of the popular party does not detract from the importance of the demonstration of popular feeling. That it took place, no matter by whom led, is the salient fact for us. That it triumphed too—triumphed over the united forces of King, Lords, and Commons—is also most notable, for the victory was a direct encouragement to further action when occasion or provocation arose.

After a decade that occasion did arise, and the

Platform was again had recourse to—only this time on a more extended scale than ever before—to convey to the Government of the day the expression of dissatisfaction with the manner in which the Government of the country was conducted, and to demand relief by economy in the administration.

This occasion was marked by fresh signs of power, for now, in distinct contrast to the previous occasion, large numbers of the wealthier and more important classes—more particularly the country gentlemen—regardless of political feelings, participated in the movement, and resorted to the Platform themselves. Even more important, however, than this was the grafting a system of organisation on the Platform by associating the different groups of the population who were having recourse to it into one combined movement, and so securing unity of voice and unity of action. Here, too, its action was rewarded with considerable success.

When next the Platform appeared—namely, at the end of another decade or so—it presented itself in a new aspect, confined exclusively to a class who hitherto were strangers to it, and displaying the first political stirrings of the civic industrial population. Almost leaderless (for, as we have seen, those who had formerly led the people, awestruck by the wide-spreading anarchy of the French Revolution, shrank doubtingly back), ignorant, ill-educated, and poor, scarce knowing what object to strive for, the easy prey of designing and reckless men, it is not wonderful that they laid themselves open to the charges of high treason, or any minor atrocity for which their opponents lay in wait for them. This time their only success with the Platform was the success of notoriety. Not profitable to them—rather the reverse—but profitable to posterity, and to think-

ing men of that time portentous enough. That Pitt grasped the meaning of it is, I think, clear, for not otherwise can we account for the unnecessary sternness and completeness of the measures of repression he obtained from Parliament. Far milder measures would have been adequate to meet the symptoms displayed. The ordinary law of the time would appear to have been quite sufficient. But he, with the foresight of statecraft, saw what the Platform meant, what it really was, and with his views on Government, endeavoured to stamp it out.

That, however, was hopeless. As well might he have expected to dam a great river in its course. We have seen the springs, we have traced the first courses, and watched the growing strength of those streams, which, together were to make the great river of public opinion, of which the Platform was to be the great exponent. There was no staying them, except for the brief period whilst the waters were gathering force to burst the dam. It may seem a fatalistic view to take, but the progress of the Platform, from the small gatherings to remonstrate against the tax on cider, down to the great gatherings of modern times, when the voice of the speaker may reach the furthermost bounds of the earth, was inevitable, and not to be stayed, at least not for long. It is true, as Lord Stanhope says in his *Life of Pitt*, that "There are times when new unparalleled dangers are only to be met by rigorous and extraordinary stretches of power. There are times when the State can be saved by no other means;" and he declares that this time was one of them. "The great majority of the people of England in 1793 and 1794," he says, "felt that everything that they most prized was imperilled by the French Revolutionary school, and far

"from deprecating they demanded a course of rigorous repression."

But when we consider how deeply interested King, Lords, and Commons, were in maintaining the existing order of things, so profitable to them, it is impossible not to feel, on calm and impartial consideration of the subject, that their views were strongly biassed and warped by self-interest, and that it was their alarm for their own privileges and advantages which mainly determined them in their decision to stifle the voice of the rising masses, and to stamp out the means of expressing it.

Wisely, indeed, was it remarked by a contemporary writer: "The majority of the discontented seem to be composed of the lower classes of the people. If they have, therefore, whereof to complain, it would be wise to examine into the nature of the complaint, and not to reject it rudely without any inquiry, merely because persons of this description may, from want of understanding, and passions little under control of reason, be led to commit enormities of the most serious nature. Wherever discontent becomes general in a nation, there must be something wrong in the administration of public affairs. I will not say something misconceived or misrepresented, for that which is false cannot prevail long against that which is true, but something radically and substantially wrong."[1]

Such a policy would, however, scarcely have been in keeping with the temper of the times or of the governing classes at that period. What recent history had taught them—and they still felt the sore smart of the lesson—was the power and success of the Platform, and of public discussion, even when it was resorted to only

[1] *The History of the Two Acts*, p. xlvi.

by some of their own class, and by the electors. These were experiences that would not have induced the Government or its dependents to regard the Platform with much favour, though they were not sufficient to justify legislative action to check them. The Platform had, however, they declared, evinced a sufficiently dangerous aspect to call for its suppression when it was adopted by a lower strata of society, and when agitators of the extreme type, caught by the glamour of French Revolutionary principles, sought to turn its power to account for what the Government considered evil purposes. In the highly excited state of the public mind consequent upon the horrors of the French Revolution, the Government, still almost despotic, and with quite enough on their hands without agitation at home to cripple them, determined to suppress it. They struck, and struck hard, a deathblow as they thought, and as their supporters hoped.

But in striking down the Platform the Government struck down one of the best means of educating the people into whose hands ultimately was to come the Government of the country. Already it had done much towards their enlightenment and instruction. That had been one of its most beneficial consequences. The agitation about the Middlesex Election, the Economy Agitation, and the recurring General Elections, were rapidly educating the people in political knowledge, awakening them to an ever-growing sense of their own importance in the State ; the habit of publicly discussing the political events of the day was ever seizing faster hold on increasing numbers, and the furious controversy that raged throughout the country about the "Two Acts" had opened out a whole new field of information and thought; had brought into prominence the deeper mean-

ing of the great principles of liberty and justice, so long obscured by the growth of the influence of the Crown; and had given the people generally a taste for, and an impetus towards, political life which, in the end, would produce vast changes in the existing form of the Constitution.

Nor, in connection with this aspect of the subject, must I refrain from mentioning some good results from the London Corresponding Society, which has been so sternly censured by the Committee of the House of Commons, and so held up to lasting execration that few can believe anything good about it. Francis Place has described them in the following passage: "The moral effects of the Society were very great indeed. It induced men to read books instead of spending their time at public-houses. It taught them to think, to respect themselves, and to desire to educate their children. It elevated them in their own opinions. It taught them the great moral lesson to 'bear and forbear,' and the discussion, in the divisions, and in the Sunday afternoon reading, and debating associations held in their own rooms, opened to them views to which they had been blind. They were compelled by these discussions to find reasons for their opinions, and to tolerate the opinions of others; in fact, it gave a new stimulus to a large mass of men who had hitherto been but too justly considered as incapable of any but the very grossest pursuits and sensual enjoyments. It elevated them in society."[1]

Within the period so far treated of, there is one other point of considerable interest in connection with the history of the Platform, which must be adverted to before we proceed, namely, how far did the statesmen of the last century use the Platform as a means of maintaining or extending their power?

[1] Place, MSS., 27,808, p. 59.

To Burke has already been assigned the honour of being the first statesman and orator who used the Platform at election time as a real instrument of political power. The occasions on which he so used it were few, but his speeches at Bristol in 1774 and 1780 recognised clearly the claims of constituents to the fullest explanation of the conduct of their representative, and his full accountability to them. That was a most important matter to have put so prominently on record. Though taking part in the Economy Agitation he does not appear to have actually spoken from the Platform in its support, but in the crisis of the struggle between Pitt and the Coalition he had recourse to the Platform at Aylesbury in 1784. After that, however, his voice from the Platform was silent.

For the honour of being the first ex-Minister who used the Platform, only two men come into competition —Lord Shelburne and Charles Fox, both of whom we may remember spoke at the Wiltshire meeting in January 1780. In one respect Lord Shelburne must be given precedence as he had been a Cabinet Minister when he spoke, and therefore must, I think, be regarded as the first ex-Cabinet Minister who ever used the Platform; but in every other respect the honour must be awarded to Fox. Lord Shelburne's appearance on the Platform was, so far as I am aware, only an isolated event; Fox habitually resorted to it not merely on the occasion of elections, but at other times also, and used it as a means of conveying instruction to the people, as a defence of his own policy, or as a basis for attack on his opponents. He was also the first Cabinet Minister who used it at the time of an election.

Pre-eminently does he stand out as the first English

statesman of ministerial rank who appreciated the power of the Platform, and who systematically used it. Whether or not it was that he liked it for the qualities which render it so much more fascinating to some men than the House of Commons, its freedom, its enthusiasm, its applause, certain it is that he was constantly addressing public meetings, so constantly, indeed, as to earn for himself the name of "the man of the people."

His peculiar position in measure accounted for this. For the greater part of his political life he represented Westminster, then the leading constituency of Great Britain—London city alone excepted—and that constituency was at his very door. He lived amongst his constituents, worked under their eyes, took them into all his confidences, and time after time frankly communicated with them from the Platform in Westminster Hall his views, his difficulties, and his plans.

When the right of public discussion and free speech fell on evil days, and many men had either gone over to the other side, or been awed into quiescence, Fox, sheltered by his position as member of Parliament, still stood forward as the undaunted, indomitable champion of popular rights.

Once, when the debates on the so-called "Gagging Bills" were in progress, Dundas inveighed bitterly against him for his appeals to the people.

"The Right Honourable gentleman, from his earliest knowledge of him, had been a friend to the system of popular meetings, but he doubted much whether he had imbibed any good principle from that system, or established any good principle by it. He displayed the most extraordinary willingness to resort to them, so that it frequently happened that he was—without the door of the House — attacking Ministers with invective and

asperity one-half of the day, where they had no means of defending themselves, and during the other half combating them within these walls with the most determined inveteracy. At one time, in order to excite the indignation of the public against Ministers for their prosecution of the American War, he displayed his oratorical talents on a stage erected for that purpose in Westminster Hall." [1]

Fox, so far from feeling reproved, gloried in this, and said, "That it was the duty of every man, and particularly of every member of Parliament, when the conduct of the Executive Government was called in question, to represent the characters and conduct of members in their true colours." And he plainly reminded the House of Mr. Pitt's eloquent speeches, in which he had formerly described "public harangues to the people" as the most agreeable and most useful duty which representatives in Parliament could discharge to their constituents.[2]

Later again we find him drawing upon himself the wrath of the King by his public speaking. At a dinner at the Whig Club on 1st of May 1798, he said, "A malign influence unfortunately prevails over the conduct of the national defence; but the inference is not that we should be slack, or remiss, or inactive, in resisting the enemy. The true inference is, that the Friends of Liberty should, with the spirit and zeal that belong to their manly character, exert themselves in averting a foreign yoke; never forgetting that in happier and more favourable times it will be equally their duty to use every effort to shake off the yoke of our English tyrants."

[1] *Parliamentary History*, 1795, vol. xxxii. p. 341.

[2] I have been unable to trace the speech to which Fox referred.

A few days after, the King thought proper to mark his disapprobation of Fox's conduct by causing his name to be erased from the list of Privy Councillors.

Later, in the same year, he excited Pitt's wrath by a public speech. Writing to Addington on the 16th October 1798, Pitt said, "Fox's speech at his anniversary. Have you seen it yet? It is so full of insult and defiance to the House of Commons that, with all possible desire to leave him to the insignificance to which he has doomed himself, I doubt whether it will be possible not to take some Parliamentary notice of it." [1]

Fired by Fox's example, some other prominent men of what remained of the Liberal party also occasionally used the Platform; but the instances where it was so used were comparatively rare, and were confined mainly to the populous constituencies of London and its neighbourhood.

Fox's great rival and contemporary, William Pitt, affords interesting negative evidence of the position of the Platform.

Neither in the memoirs of his life, by Bishop Tomline, nor in that by Gifford, is there any reference whatever to his having made any speech whatever outside Parliament. There is evidence elsewhere that we should not look for any such speeches, for Sheridan once accused him of not using the Platform. "If the Chancellor of the Exchequer was not so stiffnecked and lofty, if he condescended to mix in public meetings, he would not be apt to be led into those errors which were practised on his credulity."

Moreover, on one of those occasions when we naturally might have expected a speech from him—namely, a great dinner given on the anniversary of his birthday

[1] See *Life of Lord Sidmouth*, vol. i. p. 213.

on the 28th May 1802—he was not present to make one. In 1780 he had been returned to Parliament without even visiting his constituency, and in 1784 he had contested the University of Cambridge, where no speech was allowed. It would, indeed, appear that throughout his whole career, filling for many years a position which would have made Europe hang upon his words, had he chosen to utter any, he was silent, except when in the House of Commons. There he recognised often enough the right of the country to be taken into his confidence; thence he often addressed it. But the Platform, as we now understand it, was contemptuously ignored by him, or, where recognised, was recognised as a dangerous innovation, requiring such summary treatment as that dealt out to it in the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act, in the Seditious Meetings Act of 1795, and the supplementary measures.

The only two exceptions which I have found are the following: — The first on Saturday, 28th February 1784, when he was presented with the Freedom of the city of London at the Grocers' Hall, "where an elegant entertainment" was provided in compliment to him.[1]

Mr. Wilkes addressed him in a short speech.

Pitt's answer was: "I beg to return you my best thanks for your very obliging expressions. Nothing can be more encouraging to me in the discharge of my public duty than the countenance of those whom, from this day, I may have the honour of calling my fellow-citizens."

That, and no more. And the second at a very long interval, on the 9th of November 1805, that pathetic occasion described by Lord Stanhope, Pitt's last speech

[1] See *The Morning Chronicle*, 1st and 2d March, 1784.

in public, at the Lord Mayor's banquet at the Guildhall, in London.

Pitt went to it as Prime Minister. The Lord Mayor proposed his health as the "Saviour of Europe." Then Pitt rose and spoke as follows: "I return you many thanks for the honour you have done me, but Europe is not to be saved by any single man. England has saved herself by her exertions, and will, I trust, save Europe by her example." With only these two sentences the Minister sat down. . . . "They were the last words that Pitt ever spoke in public."

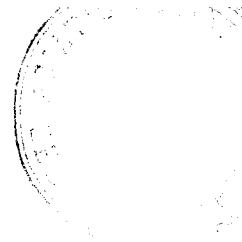
PART II

THE PLATFORM—FROM ITS FIRST SUPPRESSION

TO

ITS EMANCIPATION

1802–1825



CHAPTER VIII

THE REVIVAL OF THE PLATFORM

It is somewhat hard to realise in the present day, when the Platform is so great a power in the land, how completely non-existent it was as a factor in political life, as the nineteenth century dawned upon the country. Events of world-wide importance were occurring abroad; mighty movements were beginning at home; but the Government had closed the avenues to discussion, and the people were compelled to silence. Matter enough had they for thought; problems enough to perplex them; grievances and sufferings enough to make them cry out; but the articulate voice came not, was not permitted to come; and though the Press, trammelled and terrorised, acted to some extent as a vehicle for the expression of the thoughts of the people, the public voice, as spoken from the Platform, was dumb.

Meetings had ceased, speeches had ceased, petitions to Parliament even had fallen into abeyance. The last spark of public discussion or criticism died out with the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act in 1801 and its attendant legislation.

Though public liberty in England was at this low ebb it was not quite so low as in Scotland. That country was in far deeper political silence and darkness.

In later years she was to take her place alongside England in the struggle for political progress and enlightenment; but at this period her condition afforded an example of the depths which political torpor and submission could reach in a country nominally enjoying the blessings of freedom.

An admirable description of the political state of Scotland at this period has been given by Lord Cockburn.[1]

"The Tory party," he says, "engrossed almost the whole wealth and rank and public office of the country, and at least three-fourths of the population. . . . Jacobinism was a term denoting everything alarming and hateful, and every political objector was a Jacobin. . . .

"The chief object at which our discontented aimed was Parliamentary reform. But this and other home-bred ends were hid by a cloud of foreign follies, which the Tories exhibited as demonstrations that the correction of domestic abuses was a pretence, and Jacobinism the truth. On this foundation they represented the whole lower orders as hostile to our institutions. . . .

"The real Whigs were extremely few. Self-interest had converted some, and terror more. . . . We had no free political institutions whatever. . . . There was no free, and consequently no discussing Press. . . .

"Nor was the absence of a free public Press compensated by any freedom of public speech. Public *political* meetings could not arise, for the elements did not exist. I doubt if there was one during the twenty-five years that succeeded 1795. Nothing was viewed with such horror as any political congregation not friendly to existing power. No one could have taken a part

[1] *Memorials of His Time*, by Henry Cockburn. Edinburgh, 1856.

in the business without making up his mind to be a doomed man. No prudence could protect against the falsehood or inaccuracy of spies; and a first conviction of sedition by a Judge-picked jury was followed by fourteen years' transportation. *As a body to be referred to*, no *public* existed. Opinion was only recognised when expressed through what were acknowledged to be its legitimate organs, which meant its formal or official outlets. Public bodies, therefore, might each speak for itself; but the general community as such had no admitted claim to be consulted or cared for. The result, in a nation devoid of popular political rights, was that people were dumb, or if they spoke out, were deemed audacious."

Lord Cockburn looked on the trials of Muir and Palmer, Gerrald, Skirving, and Margarot, and the manner in which they were conducted, as the turning-point in modern Scotch history. He said: "I fear that no impartial censor can avoid detecting throughout the whole course of the trials, not mere casual indications of bias, but absolute straining for convictions. . . .

"If, instead of a Supreme Court of Justice, sitting for the trial of guilt or of innocence, it had been an ancient Commission appointed by the Crown to procure convictions, little of its judicial manner would have required to be changed. When the verdicts were returned, the Court had to exercise a discretionary power in fixing upon the sentence; which discretion ranged from one hour's imprisonment to transportation for life. Assuming transportation to be lawful, it was conceded not to be necessary; and it was not then, nor at any time, used in England as a punishment of sedition. At that time it implied a frightful voyage of many months, great wretchedness in the new colony,

"an almost complete extinction of all communication with home, and such difficulty in returning, that a man transported was considered as a man never to be seen again. Nevertheless, transportation for a first offence was the doom of every one of these prisoners.

"All this was approved of no doubt, not only by the Tories, but by Parliament, advised by the Lord Chancellor. But this never satisfied judicious men, and it can neither silence nor pervert history. . . .

"These trials, sunk deep not merely into the popular mind, but into the minds of all men who thought. It was by these proceedings, more than by any other wrong, that the spirit of discontent justified itself throughout the rest of that age. It was to them that peaceful reformers appealed, for the practical answer to those who pretended to uphold our whole Scotch system as needing no change. . . . This was the first time that Scotland had ever been agitated by discussions upon general principles of liberty. Neither the Union, nor the two Rebellions, nor even the Revolution, had any of this matter in them. The course of this, our first conflict of constitutional opinion, has been very distinctly marked. With no improvement in their public education, habits, or institutions; with all power in the hands of those with whom change was in itself an ultimate evil, and with reason superseded by dread of revolution, the cause of the people was put down, and could not possibly have been then raised up. The only hope was in the decline of the circumstances that had sunk it. What had to be waited for was—the increase of numbers and of wealth, the waning of the Revolutionary horror, the dying out of the hard old aristocracy, the advance of a new generation, and the rise of new guides."

The picture is a graphic one, and Lord Cockburn

was familiar with the subject he was writing about. The things to be waited for were slowly coming, not alone in Scotland, but in England also; but many a weary step had to be taken, many a sacrifice made, before the people were to secure the goal of their desires—their own government; and the brunt of the struggle had to be borne almost alone by England, until the Parliamentary Reform Act of 1832 gave Scotland free movement.

The existence of the Platform would have been almost completely forgotten at this time if it had not been for the occurrence of a general election. That event woke it in its electoral phase once more into life.

"The people of England," wrote Jean Jacques Rousseau in *Le Contrat Social*, "deceive themselves, when they fancy they are free; they are so, in fact, only during the interval between a dissolution of one Parliament and the election of another; for so soon as a new one is elected, they are again in chains, and lose all their virtue as a people. And thus, by the use they make of their few moments of liberty, they deserve to lose it."[1]

One of these "few moments of liberty," shortened down from forty to fifteen days, came in 1802, Parliament being dissolved on the 26th of June. Possibly the fact that the voice of public opinion had been silenced made people keener about the elections, for there was an evident growth of political interest compared with recent years. The number of contests was larger than on any previous occasion, except 1784, and although they had little or no effect so far as party strength was concerned, they were very useful in reminding the people of the existence of the Platform, and familiarising them with it.

[1] Book III. chap. xv.

There were contests in six English counties, in two Welsh counties, and in sixty-two boroughs.[1] In Scotland the democratic interest showed itself more alive and active than had been known for many years past.[2] In England political feeling wakened up. "The attention of the country is totally occupied with the elections," wrote Cobbett in his *Political Register* in July; "several of which are carried on with great warmth"—a fact readily to be believed when we hear[3] that "the rioting during the election at Northampton lasted six days, and one of the candidates had to fly for his life," and that at Evesham "the whole of the last week was signalised by broken heads and bloody noses."[4]

According to Cobbett,[5] who at this early period of his political life was a Conservative, "The dissolution of Parliament has already furnished some of the seditious with an opportunity of venting their malice against the Government. . . . The people have been told, in two factious Addresses in particular, that they are not represented in the House of Commons, and that until it be reformed it is in vain for them to hope for any good from that quarter."

Fox, who for nearly twenty-two years had represented Westminster, again stood for his old constituency, though he told his constituents he had for some years utterly despaired of rendering any useful service to them. The occasion is memorable for the clear declaration he made of his political creed. He said in one of his speeches[6] to the electors: "My principles are short; they are the principles of the Constitution of Great

[1] *The Register of Parliamentary Contested Elections*, by H. S. Smith. London, 1842.

[2] Letter from Dundas to Addington, see *Life of Lord Sidmouth*, vol. ii. p. 72.

[3] Hansard, vol. xxxvi. p. 1230.

[4] See *The Times*, 7th July 1802.

[5] *Political Register*, 1802, vol. i. p. 791.

[6] See *The Times*, 7th July 1802.

Britain, as they have always been understood by the most enlightened patriots of this country. I can state them in two sentences. They are these—that in theory the Sovereignty is in the people, and that in practice all the constituted authorities ought to keep in mind the Sovereign under whom they hold their power."

Negatively also from this general election we learn something of interest. Addington, the Prime Minister,[1] "visited his constituents at Devizes" and was re-elected, but no papers (at least none that I have been able to find) make any mention of his making a speech.

Evidently, therefore, Prime Ministers had not yet come to think the Platform of any use or consequence to them. Some less exalted members of Parliament however did think the Platform of use for election purposes, or to put it more accurately, some of the popular constituencies expected the candidates to address them, and the candidates had to fall in with the expectations of the electors. Among the few populous constituencies of the pre-reform era was Yorkshire, and here Wilberforce was candidate again, and spoke. His speeches are an interesting example of the best class of election Platform oratory at this period. He was returned without a contest, but he spoke both on being proposed, and on being elected. The election was held at York, and there was a large assembly of freeholders. In the latter of his speeches he said: "The scene in which we are now present is indeed a magnificent spectacle. To see the freeholders of this great county assembled together, and freely choosing their own representatives in Parliament, is a sight in the highest degree gratifying and animating to those who know the real nature and the high value of true

[1] See *Life of Lord Sidmouth*, vol. ii. p. 71.

"liberty. . . . Let those deluded men, whether of this or any other country, who have so far mistaken the real spirit of liberty as to confound it with anarchy, come hither and have their error corrected, and learn to know and admire that true image of constitutional freedom which is here exhibited."

His other speech is more interesting as showing what he conceived to be the relationship between a representative and his constituents. He said: "We cannot expect that even our constituents should approve of every particular of our conduct. They may indeed, and ought to require that their representatives should agree with them in the great principles of political conduct, and likewise in the general line to be pursued in any given conjuncture of affairs. But provided there be this general agreement, they ought not too scrupulously to look for an exact coincidence in every individual vote, and on every particular question. I heartily rejoice to find that you approve of these principles. They send your member to Parliament, the free and liberal representative of a free people, and not your slave, fettered and shackled—a character which I should feel degrading, though it were to be the slave even of the county of York itself."[1]

There is, already here, some slight modification of the more independent views put forward by Edmund Burke which I have already quoted. In later years the change will become ever more and more marked.

It would seem from these speeches that in the more popular constituencies a closer relationship was becoming recognised between members and their constituents, and this view is confirmed by a speech of Canning's in

[1] Cobbett's *Political Register*, 1802, p. 1617.

the following year.[1] On a motion relative to the conduct of Ministers he inveighed against them for having given expression, almost daily before Christmas 1802, to a belief in the continuance of peace, whilst their internal convictions were directly at variance with the assertions which they made; and he exclaimed: "Should it be borne that members should have been sent down among their constituents (as had happened at the Christmas recess) to spread falsehood and error throughout the country; and that the confiding country should have been misled into incorrect and groundless views and deluded into visionary hopes, only that it might feel more seriously the blow of disappointment."

An interesting statement bearing on the Platform at this general election is to be found in an entertaining tract entitled "Thoughts on the late General Election as demonstrative of the Progress of Jacobinism," by a certain John Bowles, a vehement Tory barrister. He said that, "During a contest at Lancaster in the General Election of 1802, the Jacobinical mob was addressed by *a lady*, who told them that 'the contest was between shoes and wooden clogs, between fine shirts and coarse ones, between the opulent and the poor, and that the people were everything if they chose to assert their rights.'"[2]

The election over, the Platform sank again into a state of quiescence. The suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act ceased, the Act against Seditious Meetings expired, but the spirit of the reformers had been temporarily broken, and the Act against the Societies, which was still in force, effectually held the more extreme or desperate class of men in check. The

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxvi., 1803, p. 1566.

[2] "Thoughts on the late General Election," etc., by John Bowles, p. 63.

beginning of the nineteenth century, however, was not a time when internal constitutional reforms could be considered. The brief interlude of peace had come only too quickly to an end, and Great Britain was once more plunged into a war for her very existence as a nation. In a life-and-death struggle every other consideration has to be subordinated; the great bulk of the people of England felt that it had to be so; and, therefore, during the long years that the war lasted, the history of the Platform lay mainly in the contests of Parliamentary elections, and in the occasional outbursts of opinion upon some event of the day, of such a character as to impel the people to indignant remonstrant speech.

The sessions of 1803 and of 1804 were entirely taken up with the discussion of the measures rendered necessary by the war—Volunteer Bills, Additional Force Bills, Foreign Troops Enlistment Bills. No meeting worth reporting appears to have been held in the country. No Petition worth mentioning appears to have been presented to Parliament. Public attention was absorbed in the dread of invasion, which appeared imminent, and in preparation to meet it.

The only break in the silence of the Platform during these years was a contested election which took place in the county of Middlesex in July 1804. A detailed account of it shows the part which the Platform could take on such rare occasions. The illustration is an extreme one, because the contest was for the representation of a county then one of the most populous and popular constituencies in the kingdom; it extended over the full legal period then allowed for an election, and the electorate was one of the most enlightened, civilised, and advanced in the country.

A vacancy had occurred in the representation of the

county, and the seat was contested by Sir Francis Burdett and a Mr. Mainwaring, the former being the popular candidate.[1]

Early on Monday morning, the 23d of July, Sir F. Burdett drove out to Brentford from London, with bands and banners and seven outriders, and a procession of vehicles following him; and soon after Mr. Mainwaring arrived in a chariot and six, with postilions in scarlet livery. The space in front of the hustings was crowded. At half-past ten the sheriffs proceeded to the business of the day. The reading of the writs and the usual preliminary formalities being gone through, Mr. P. Moore, M.P., made a speech, proposing Sir F. Burdett, and Mr. Knight seconded the nomination. Sir W. Curtis began a speech, but there was "such a degree of hissing" that the sheriff had to intercede for a hearing for him, which being secured, he again came forward, and proposed Mr. Mainwaring, and Colonel Wood seconded the nomination.

Being thus proposed, Sir F. Burdett rose to speak. He was received with acclamation, and made a regular electioneering speech. Mr. Mainwaring followed, but after some sentences the hissing became so loud he had to stop. The two candidates were then formally proposed by the sheriffs, a show of hands taken, and a poll demanded. The poll at once commenced, and was continued till five o'clock, when the sheriffs declared the numbers to be for Sir F. Burdett, 611; for Mr. Mainwaring, 528. Sir F. Burdett then made a speech. Mr. Mainwaring tried to do the same, but the people would not hear him. The poll was then adjourned. At ten o'clock the next day the poll was reopened. When it

[1] For the detailed account of this election, with reports of speeches, see Cobbett's *Political Register* for 1804, vol. vi. p. 257.

closed in the evening Sir F. Burdett had 972 votes, Mainwaring 927. Again did Sir F. Burdett deliver a speech; again did Mr. Mainwaring attempt to address the electors; but after a variety of efforts the tumult of the populace was so very great that he pointed several times to the numbers on the poll board and retired from the hustings.

The third day Mr. Mainwaring was one vote ahead. It would be tedious to go through the proceedings day by day. Every evening, at the close of the poll, Sir F. Burdett made a speech; every day Mr. Mainwaring attempted to do so too. The fourth day varied somewhat, inasmuch, as after the close of the poll for the day, Sir F. Burdett dined at a tavern with some 300 of his friends, where his health was drunk with three times three — "the warm friend of humanity, the indignant resister of oppression, and the steady assertor of his country's rights." On the seventh day the evening was spent in the same way. Still Mr. Mainwaring kept slightly ahead. On the eighth day he was 64 votes ahead. Each day he tried to speak, each day he had been refused a hearing. On this day he tried again, "but the voice of a Stentor, or the eloquence of a Demosthenes would have vainly attempted to make any impression." Ninth, tenth, eleventh, twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth day, still the same; one wonders at any human endurance holding out. On the fifteenth day the poll closed. Owing to some disputed votes the declaration of the poll was not given that night. Sir F. Burdett made a final speech, and was escorted to London by a cavalcade and bands, not reaching his house till eleven o'clock at night. The next day he was again back at Brentford, and the poll was declared for Mr. Mainwaring, 2828; for Sir F.

Burdett, 2823—majority for Mainwaring, 5. When the business of the hustings was declared to be finally at an end, Mr. Mainwaring was conveyed under protection of the police to the house of a friend.

A political revel such as this, where, for nearly three weeks, the county town was kept in a whirl of excitement and agitation, and was the centre of the political passions and hopes of the county, where day after day the electors had the opportunity of hearing political speeches from the Platform, of learning at least something on the subject of politics, and of feeling that the power actually rested with them of deciding which of the competitors was to represent them in Parliament—an episode such as this could not but quicken political life, and awaken political enthusiasm, which, as years went on, would gather force and volume.

How long the Platform might have remained quiescent, except for occasional electoral struggles, it is impossible to say. The suspicion of Jacobinism, and the taint of sedition, which its foes had succeeded in fixing on it, might possibly have kept it in abeyance for a prolonged period. In the temper, and tone, and circumstances of the times many years might have elapsed before it again became an active force. Suddenly, however, an event occurred which woke it into life and action. A series of peculations of public funds was brought to light, and the person incriminated was no petty officer of the public service, but a Cabinet Minister, the First Lord of the Admiralty and Treasurer of the Navy—Lord Melville, he who had been the well-known Henry Dundas. Two or three other officials of the Department were also inculpated with him. The disclosure was all the more striking, inasmuch, as Lord Melville had spent his whole life in

politics. He was a close friend of Pitt, next to Pitt was the most able and experienced member of Pitt's Cabinet, was possessed of great influence, and enjoyed a large amount of public confidence.

A Commission had been appointed in 1803 by an Act of Parliament to inquire and examine into any irregularities, frauds, or abuses, in the administration of the naval departments. In their tenth Report, which was made in 1805, the Commissioners drew attention to the fact that large sums of the public money which had passed through Lord Melville's hands, and the hands of two or three other officials of the Department were utterly unaccounted for, and of which they could get no account from him.

Lord Melville's replies to the Commissioners when questioned were not those of an innocent man. He endeavoured to defend himself on the plea that he could not disclose confidential communications of Government, then that he had burnt the papers—which would have decided his guilt or innocence,—then that he had lost his recollection of the whole affair, though it had so recently occurred.

The matter was brought before the House of Commons by Mr. Whitbread on the 8th April, who charged Lord Melville first with having applied the money of the public to other uses than those of the naval department, in contempt of an Act of Parliament, and in gross violation of his duty; and secondly, with conniving at a system of peculation in an individual for whose conduct in the use of the public money he was deeply responsible; and thirdly, with his having himself been a participator in such peculation.[1]

Whitbread said: "A wound had been inflicted on

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. iv. p. 255.

the very existence of the country, which it was the duty of every member of the House to see checked and punished."

The Government did their best to break the force of this indictment, and to mitigate the heinousness of the offence, and Pitt moved "the previous question," and then that the Report of the Commissioners should be referred to a Select Committee, to examine the matter thereof, and report the same to the House.

On the division, 216 voted for Mr. Whitbread's first resolution, and 216 for the Government proposal. The Speaker gave his casting vote in favour of Mr. Whitbread's motion, thereby making a majority of one.[1]

Several resolutions on the subject were then adopted by the House of Commons, the principal one being: "That the Right Hon. Lord Viscount Melville having been privy to, and connived at the withdrawing from the Bank of England, for purposes of private interest or emolument, sums issued to him as Treasurer of the Navy, and placed to his account in the Bank, according to the provisions of the 25 Geo. III., cap. 31, has been guilty of a gross violation of the law, and a high breach of duty."

Two days later, and before an Address could be moved to the King for his removal from office, he resigned his appointment as First Lord of the Admiralty.

The shock to the public mind was great.

Here, at first sight, was proof of what year after year the Platform had been alleging against successive Governments—an enormous malversation of public funds and wholesale corruption. Here was conclusive evidence of the necessity of Parliamentary reform.

The Platform had not, indeed, waited even for

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. iv. p. 320.

Parliamentary action, for shortly after the publication of the tenth Report of the Commissioners, a requisition was made to the Lord Mayor of London for a meeting of the Common Hall, "to consider the flagrant abuses in the management and expenditure of the public money; for instructing the representatives of the city in Parliament strenuously to promote all inquiry for the said abuses, and to vote for the removal from the public service of all persons implicated in them."

Before the meeting was held, however, action had been taken in the House of Commons, and when the meeting came off on the 18th April, the House of Commons was warmly praised.

Waithman said: "It is a matter of sincere satisfaction that the House of Commons has vindicated our rights; that they have, indeed, shown themselves the true representatives of the country; that they have increased our confidence in them as the guardians alike of our property and our liberties."[1]

Resolutions were passed, and an Address to the King adopted.

Southwark, Westminster, Middlesex, all held meetings, at all of which there rang from the Platform condemnation of the conduct now brought to light. The meeting of the freeholders of Middlesex was "the most numerous meeting we ever saw. It breathed a spirit of manly firmness and indignation at the flagrant and atrocious conduct of Ministers which for many years we have not been accustomed to see at any meeting of the people."[2] The speech of a Mr. Tuffnell affords a good summary of the ideas of the Platform on the subject. He said: "It is proved that the public money has been converted to corrupt purposes by one of the most

[1] *Morning Chronicle*, 19th April. [2] *Ibid.*, 3d May.

responsible and most confidential members of his Majesty's Cabinet. It is proved that a system of fraud and peculation has, for a period of above sixteen years, been carried on in one of the most important and expensive departments of Government under the immediate control of Lord Melville, and that it has been committed in direct violation of an Act of Parliament—an Act which had been introduced and framed by himself. . . . Shall it be endured that at a period when we are arrived almost at the extreme limits of possible taxation—when we are reduced to the necessity of taxing the very sources of existence—when we are compelled to lay heavy additional imposts on all the most essential articles of life, without which the poorest in the country cannot subsist? Shall it be endured that men holding the highest and most lucrative situations in the country shall violate the most salutary Acts of the Legislature? Shall such men with impunity divert the public money from its prescribed course to purposes of private emolument or public corruption? The House of Commons, by their decision, have diffused general confidence and satisfaction, and have justly entitled themselves to the warmest gratitude of their country. . . . It remains for us to perform our duty, in exercising the right of the people to express our sentiments on all public measures." A Petition asking for Lord Melville's punishment, etc., was adopted, and for an inquiry into all other departments of the State.

On the 3d May the electors of Westminster held a meeting in Palace Yard. Fox spoke at it. He urged further proceedings against Lord Melville. The only pledge they had against future abuses was the infliction of exemplary vengeance. He called on the meeting not to flag in their exertions to have all this business sifted

to the bottom, for if they were not true to themselves how could they expect their representatives to be anxious for the correction of abuses.

"The gentry, clergy, and freeholders" of Northumberland, Berkshire, Cornwall, Hants, Essex, Surrey, Kent, and other counties, had their meetings, and sent Petitions to the House of Commons against Lord Melville. A system of economy also was urgently pressed. The House was reminded of the great and increasing necessity for its vigilant attention to the due application of the public money, and it was besought to persevere in the inquiries, and to bring all delinquents to condign and exemplary punishment.[1] Evidently, though the country had been forced into quiescence, it had not been for ever silenced. Early in May 1805 Lord Melville's name was removed from the list of the Privy Council, and soon after a motion was carried for his impeachment. The trial, which took place in the House of Lords, did not come off until April in the following year, when the majority of the Lords found him "Not guilty," though on one of the charges there was only a majority of 27 in favour of his innocence.[2]

Some light is thrown on the value of this acquittal by an entry in the diary of Charles Greville.

"If any proof were requisite of the mighty influence of party spirit, it would be found in a still stronger light in the State Trials in the House of Lords. I have in my mind the trial of Lord Melville. . . . Either by an extraordinary accident, or by the influence of party spirit, we beheld all the peers on the ministerial side of the House declaring Lord Melville innocent, and all those of the Opposition pronouncing him guilty."[3]

[1] For copies of these Petitions see Cobbett's *Political Register*, vol. vii.

[2] 81-54, and on another 31 (83-52).

[3] See Greville, *Memoirs*, vol. i. p. 19.

On the 23d January 1806 William Pitt, the great Minister, passed away.

Lord Grenville became Prime Minister in his stead, Fox Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Grey First Lord of the Admiralty, and Erskine Lord Chancellor. But even with these men in power—men who for years had stood in the front rank of reformers—little reform legislation was practicable.

The issues at stake in the war were still so vital and absorbing that there was little time or energy left to devote to home affairs. Within a short time Fox died. Before that sad event happened, however, one pledge was obtained from the House on the subject of the slave-trade, to which more detailed reference will presently be made, and on the 24th October 1806 Parliament was dissolved.

If we may judge by the number of contests, it would appear that there was some falling off in political activity, and therefore in the scope for the Platform. There were contests in only 5 English counties, and in 46 boroughs, or a total of 51 contests as against 73 in 1802. But, even so, the stagnation of the political life of the people was broken.

Cobbett,[1] who by this time had become a strong reformer, and an advanced politician, has summed up admirably the advantages of a general election from the popular point of view.

He wrote: "The reason for which I like a dissolution of Parliament is, that be the motive what it may from which it takes place, it is sure to make a little *stir*. It is sure to keep alive certain useful recollections. . . . Every dissolution gives rise to some one or more important contests, as, for instance, in the present case the contests in Hants, Middlesex, and Westminster.[2]

[1] *Political Register*, 1806, vol. x. p. 988. [2] *Ibid.* p. 990.

"In Hampshire, on both sides, the candidates appealed, in words at least, to the *independence* of the freeholders. They professed on both sides to be struggling for the independence of the county. On the one side they made a merit of having served long in Parliament without obtaining places or pensions; and, on the other side, one of the candidates actually resigned a place in order thereby to remove one objection against him."

"Those who see in an election no other object than merely that of seating a member in the House of Commons, will of course see no good that has been done by the dissolution in giving rise to the contests in Middlesex and Westminster. But will such persons, however much they may dispute the *good*, pretend to believe that the sixteen speeches of Sir F. Burdett, promulgated as they have been through every public print in the whole kingdom, together with his several addresses, particularly the last, will they pretend that all these have produced no effect? . . . Will they pretend that all the speeches, all the addresses, all the resolutions, all the numerous publications relative to the Westminster election, have had no effect upon the people? . . .

"A dissolution of Parliament is always, and always must be, a positive good; because it is sure to give rise to much discussion upon the principles, and the conduct, private as well as public, of men aiming at posts of high trust. At the same time that it creates the subject of discussion, it enlarges, for a few days at least, the freedom of discussion; and as free discussion must necessarily tend to the establishment and the extension of truth, it must, by all those who prefer truth to falsehood, and knowledge to ignorance, be regarded as a good."

There was another side to elections, however, and Cobbett's own experiences are amusing, and give us an example of how little the Platform availed at some places.[1] He went down to contest Honiton in Devonshire in 1806, but after addressing the electors he withdrew.

"When I went as a candidate to Honiton in the year 1806, I began by posting up a bill, having at the top of it this passage of Scripture: 'Fire shall consume the tabernacles of bribery.' After this I addressed myself to the people of the place, telling them how wicked and detestable it was to take bribes. Most of the corrupt villains laughed in my face; but some of the women actually cried out against me as I went along the streets, as a man that had come to rob them of their *blessing*.

"The whole of the inhabitants of the borough, the whole of the persons who return two members to Parliament, are bound together in an indissoluble chain of venality. . . . One man told me that he and his wife had lived all their lives in the borough, and had never before heard a word of truth from a candidate."

The new Parliament met on the 15th December 1806, and one measure was promptly carried by it, which was a triumph for a cause in which the Platform had been largely utilised—this was the abolition of the slave trade.

It is in some cases difficult to determine how far the Platform may rightly claim to have brought about a particular measure of reform. In the larger, more important agitations, there is no difficulty; one sees at once that they were carried by the Platform, but in some of the less important agitations the point is not so clear, other agencies having been also used. After some

[1] *Political Register*, vol. xlviii. p. 500.

acquaintance with successive agitations in which the Platform took part, one can easily trace a regular course of procedure. An abuse or grievance became felt, an association would be formed to obtain a reform, and essays, leaflets, pamphlets, articles in the Press, employed to enlighten and influence the public mind. Meetings would be held, and the persuasive influence of the Platform pressed into service. If the association counted amongst its members some members of Parliament, debates in Parliament would be originated. The debates would be reported in and criticised by the Press, and public attention further directed to the subject; thus all these agencies or powers would act and react one upon another, until it seems unfair to attribute to any one of them the decisive influence in securing the reform. History, moreover, has usually been so written as to give the aspect that the struggle for particular reforms has been fought in Parliament. The progress of a cause was recorded in growing minorities and diminishing majorities there, the gradual change was ascribed to the speeches and views of members in Parliament, and the ultimate measure which secured the object of the agitation was attributed to the wisdom of a particular Government.

The time was, when history was made by kings and Parliament alone, and historians are to be excused for narrowing their records accordingly. Now, however, a nation's life lies in other things than these; far wider interests and fields have developed themselves, and claim equality if not priority; a truer appreciation of the principles of history prevails, and piercing the veil of Parliamentary action, the forces lying behind it—the vital forces of the life of the nation—are sought out and described.

The question of the Slave Trade had in one way or another been before Parliament for twenty years. It was started in 1787, when "a meeting of several humane men" was held in London, who formed themselves into a Committee or Association to raise funds and collect the information necessary for procuring the abolition of the trade in African slaves.[1]

By their means many publications were circulated, and a general knowledge of the horrors of the trade extensively diffused; they became a central body, from which emanated many similar societies in the chief towns, and they urged the people to petition for abolition, and even to forbear the use of colonial productions till it could be obtained.

Writing in February 1788 Wilberforce says, referring to the slave trade: "It is highly desirable that the public voice should be exerted in our support as loudly and as universally as possible. Many places and some counties have already determined to petition to Parliament, and I should be sorry that our little kingdom should be backward in its endeavours to rescue our fellow-creatures from misery, and relieve our national character from the foulest dishonour. I am persuaded that if a beginning is made, the work will go on with spirit. There is no need of a county meeting, but district meetings might be held in different parts of the county, and the rest be effected by public advertisements."

By about 1792 numerous public meetings on the question were taking place, and Petitions were sent by them to Parliament. "Of the enthusiasm of the nation at this time," wrote Clarkson, pardonably enthusiastic himself, "none can form an opinion but they who

[1] See *History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, by Thomas Clarkson, 1839.

"witnessed it. . . . Great pains were taken by interested persons in many places to prevent public meetings; but no efforts could avail. The current ran with such strength and rapidity that it was impossible to stem it." [1]

The question had many warm advocates in Parliament, foremost among them being Wilberforce, to whom the main honour of this great philanthropic measure is due, and at different times it was supported by the leaders on both sides. It was, however, left very much to the fortune of desultory debate in Parliament, and to the influence of the popular cry out of doors. Now at last, with a Whig Government in office, Fox, Secretary of State, who for sixteen or seventeen years of his life had strenuously supported Wilberforce in this matter, took the subject warmly up, and at his instigation a resolution was adopted by the House of Commons, pledging itself at the very earliest opportunity to pass a measure abolishing the trade.

"If he had passed that measure," said Fox, "he would feel that he could retire from public life with comfort and conscious satisfaction that he had done his duty" [2]—prophetic words, for before Parliament met again he had passed away. His colleagues, however, gave effect to his wish, and to the pledge of the House of Commons, that it would take the earliest opportunity of considering the question; and when the new Parliament met on the 15th of December, one of the first measures proposed was the abolition of the Slave Trade. It was introduced in the House of Lords and carried there. In the House of Commons it was carried by triumphant majorities through every stage of its pro-

[1] See *History of the Abolition of the Slave Trade*, by Thomas Clarkson 1839, p. 497.

[2] *Parliamentary Debates*, 1806, vol. vii. p. 580.

gress, and it received the royal assent on the 25th March 1807; only just in time, for half an hour later there was a change of Government, and the measure would certainly have been delayed, possibly dropped for years. It was a great and glorious triumph for public opinion, and in the formation of that public opinion the Platform, though not so obtrusive as at other times, had played an important, useful, and convincing part.

As to the share taken by Parliament in this great reform, we have the very discriminating view of a contemporary writer in the *Edinburgh Review*. He wrote: "The measure has, no doubt, been carried through by the enlightened zeal of the late Ministry. But there are predisposing causes to which the ultimate result must be ascribed. This is not, we apprehend, one of the cases where the wisdom of Government has gone before the voice of the people, where great statesmen, outstripping their age, have introduced changes, barely acquiesced in for the present, and justly appreciated only by after-times. The sense of the nation has pressed the abolition upon our rulers. Parliament has complied with the general feeling, after the eyes of all men were opened, and their voices lifted up against the combined impolicy and injustice of the slave-trade."[1]

We must return, however, to more general events. The Whig Ministry, before the royal assent was given to this Bill, ran full tilt on the rock on which Pitt had foundered in 1801—namely, on that of concessions to the Roman Catholics. The King summarily dismissed them, and in April the Duke of Portland was made Prime Minister, with Perceval as Chancellor

[1] *Edinburgh Review*, vol. x. p. 205, 1807.

of the Exchequer, and Canning as Foreign Secretary, Naturally enough, in order to strengthen themselves, they were anxious to get a House of Commons elected on the new issues caused by the fiasco of the Whigs, and, being determined to take advantage of the "No Popery" cry which had been most industriously excited throughout the country, Parliament was dissolved on 27th of April,—his Majesty "being anxious to recur to the sense of his people, while the events which have recently taken place are fresh in their recollection." [1]

Thus, within the brief period of six months, the unprecedented thing was seen of two general elections—or three general elections in five years—enough almost one would have thought to have satisfied the advocates of "Annual Parliaments;" but annual Parliaments without an extension of the franchise would have been no help towards a better state of things.

In many constituencies this appeal to the people was of a specially dubious sort, for the newspapers of the time were full of advertisements for or of seats.

"A Borough. A gentleman of fortune and respectability will hear of one by immediately applying to." [2]

. . . . . .

"Seat in a Certain Assembly. Any gentleman having the disposal of a Close One may apply to, etc. etc." [3]

"*Dissolution.* Any gentleman who has it in his power to secure *Interest* for a *Seat* in a certain *Assembly* will address a line without delay, etc. etc." [4]

In such places the Platform was not likely to be had recourse to, or to be of more effect than Cobbett's experiences at Honiton. Although a general election had taken place only six months previously,

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. ix. p. 552.
[2] *Morning Post*, 1st May 1807.
[3] *Morning Post*, 2d May 1807.
[4] *Ibid.* 8th May 1807.

the political energies of the constituencies were not exhausted, and there were contests in 9 counties in England, and 51 boroughs, or a total of 60, as against 51 in 1806. One at least was vigorous enough, for in Sussex occurred "the most furious contest that ever took place in the county."[1] . . . The votes of one of the members in favour of the slave trade having given great offence to a large number of the freeholders, especially to the dissenters. . . . For fifteen days the greatest exertions were made by the friends of both parties." At length, on the last day, the popular candidate was beaten by a small majority.

The appeal to the people, or rather to the very limited number of electors who, in the King's phraseology, constituted "his people," resulted in a majority for the new Ministry, and the Tories were once more placed in authority with an enormous majority.[2] For the following twenty-three years, uninterrupted by a single break, that autocratic party held the reins of power, and the Government of the country was in the hands of the men who most hated and dreaded the Platform. No wonder then that the efforts of the people to make the Platform a power in the State were discouraged and checked in every possible way, and on every possible occasion. For that prolonged period the people had to continue the fight for freedom of speech, and freedom of meeting, and for a better and more equitable system of Government; the years were years of probation, the struggle a long course of severe discipline; but the triumph when it came, as it ultimately did, was all the greater and more complete, and was worth the labour, and trials, and sufferings which had been endured.

[1] *The Parliamentary History of the County of Sussex*, p. 3, by W. D. Cooper.

[2] On the first great trial of strength the Government had 350 supporters against 155 opponents.

The new Parliament met on the 22d of June 1807.

It is somewhat remarkable that with the growing intelligence and education of the people, and the expiration of the most restrictive portion of the prohibitive laws, public meetings had not already been more numerous. The explanation is to be found partly in the feeling of hopelessness resulting from previous disappointments, partly in the absorption of the country in the war, and partly in the want of leaders. Another reason is also given by Lord Stanhope in a letter to Major Cartwright written in 1805.[1] "I have seen too much not to be thoroughly sick of the old dull road of meetings of freeholders convened by the aristocracy,"—a letter which clearly showed the disinclination of some of the leaders to attempt a revival of county meetings. Fox, "the man of the people," was no longer alive to inspire them, and no great popular leader had arisen who could at all supply the place he had held. A change, however, was about to take place.

The discreditable transactions in which Lord Melville was concerned had awakened the Platform into life; the elections of 1806 and 1807 gave it additional impulse, and other events soon followed to quicken its attention and give it occupation.

Hence, from this time on, we find the practice of holding meetings being revived, and of recourse being had to the Platform for the expression of opinions on the various events of the day. It is noticeable that the scope of the meetings thus reviving, or, in other words, the subjects treated of at them, assumed a wider range than ever before, showing clearly how far more keenly the people were becoming interested in political events, and how far more closely and jealously they watched

[1] See *Life of Major Cartwright*, by his niece, vol. i. p. 327.

the acts of the Government. The old subject of Parliamentary reform once more broke in on the public ear. On the 10th July 1807 a meeting of freemen and freeholders was held at Bristol in favour of inquiring into the present state of the elective franchise, and Henry Hunt,[1] now beginning his political career, was in the chair; but the meeting was little more than a reminder that the subject was still there, and still to be settled, and no other places followed Bristol's example.

Early in 1808 more urgent and formidable incentives to public meetings began to show themselves—want and distress. The fearful cost of the never-ending war, but above all, the high prices of food, injuriously affected nearly every class, but fell with direst and most calamitous effect on the poorer classes. Those at Bolton in their distress met and adopted a Petition which was presented to Parliament, setting forth that the petitioners were suffering "great privations on account of the depressed state of manufactures"[2] that the wages of labour were reduced, that thousands were in the most extreme distress, that numbers were in absolute want of the necessaries of life; that they were of opinion that the continuance of the war was the cause of their sufferings, and they prayed for peace. Other places followed the example; numerous meetings were held, and numerous Petitions signed.

In Manchester the hardships of the times led to a contest between the weavers and their employers regarding wages, and meetings were held on the 24th and 25th May in St. George's Fields to promote a Bill for fixing a minimum rate of wages. The meetings

[1] See *Memoirs of Henry Hunt*, by himself, vol. ii. p. 275; see also Cobbett's *Political Register*, vol. xii. p. 210.

[2] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. x. p. 692, 22d February 1808.

"awakened the apprehensions of the authorities of the town," and on the latter day the Riot Act was read, the military were ordered to disperse the meeting, one weaver was killed, and several wounded. It was a pitiable scene, not one for which the Platform was responsible, rather one for which the absence of the Platform was accountable, for the guides and instructors of the people were gone.

"Where were the men," says Prentice in his *History of Manchester*, "who could have reasoned with the weavers on the causes of their distress and the remedies which they ought to have demanded? Some were frightened out of the field by the prosecutions of 1794; some, shocked by the atrocities perpetrated during the French Revolution, had lost their sympathies with the multitude, and regarded a movement for increased wages as the precursor of a demand for democratic government, and many had sunk into a hopeless and selfish indifference."[1]

In the following year other events gave a considerable impetus to the expression of public feelings, case after case coming to light of shameful misconduct on the part of some of the very highest officials of the State, and triumphantly justifying charges which hitherto had been indignantly denied as the malicious fabrications of Jacobinical revolutionists.

The first disclosure concerned no less a personage than the Duke of York, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, and a son of the King. Again was the House of Commons the scene of a sensational indictment. On the 27th of January Colonel Wardle of the Militia brought before it a series of allegations against the

[1] *Historical Sketches and Personal Recollections of Manchester*, by Archibald Prentice, p. 33.

Duke of York, directly charging him with corruption in the appointment to Commissions in the Army, in the regulation of exchanges, and in the filling up of vacancies, and he declared that unless the system of corruption which had so long prevailed in the military department should be done away with, this country might fall an easy prey to the enemy.[1] The scandal was heightened by the fact that the other person involved in the charge was the mistress of the Duke, a certain Mrs. Clarke, the Duke himself being a married man. The Government, for once unable to meet the charge with mere denial, was compelled to recognise the necessity of the allegations being inquired into fully, and the inquiry was undertaken by a Committee of the whole House of Commons.

The inquiry lasted seven weeks, and the attention of the public was riveted on the proceedings in the House. At the end of that time the House passed a resolution by 364 votes to 123, or by a majority of 241, that there was no ground for the charges made against the Duke in the execution of his official duties as Commander-in-Chief;[2] but two days after this the Duke resigned his office, and the House, with a contradictoriness, strangely at variance with its previous resolution, passed one that, in consequence of this resignation, the House did not think it necessary to proceed any further into the conduct of his royal Highness, as far as that evidence related to him.

Scarcely was the inquiry over before the Platform seized on the case, and meeting after meeting was held throughout the country approving of Colonel Wardle's action, condemning the Ministry, and, in some instances,

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, 1809, vol. xii. p. 179, etc.

[2] *Ibid.* vol. xiii. p. 639.

asking for Parliamentary reform.[1] At Westminster 10,000 persons met and passed resolutions. They declared that they had long been aware of the existence of scandalous and corrupt practices in various departments of the State, and that the fact had now been made manifest to every part of the United Kingdom.

They thanked Colonel Wardle, and expressed the hope that the discoveries made ought to animate the people to prosecute inquiry and reform in all the departments of the State.

The Liverymen of London, in meeting assembled, declared that it had lately been proved that abuses of a most corrupt nature and ruinous tendency have existed, and still exist, in various branches of the administration of public affairs.

The freeholders of Middlesex met; Hertfordshire, Huntingdonshire, Cornwall, Wilts, Herefordshire, Hampshire, and several other counties, had county meetings; 5000 persons met at Sheffield, and large numbers at other cities and towns. The meeting of Wiltshire was "the first public meeting which, within the memory of man, was ever held in the county for any other purpose but that of an election."[2]

The meeting of Hampshire was attended by some 1800 to 2000 persons, and consisted chiefly of the principal tradesmen and yeomanry of the county.

"We saw none of that rabble," wrote Cobbett, "that follow the heels of an election candidate for the sake of a little dirty drink; we heard no senseless bawling on the one side or the other; no squads of hirelings to hiss or to applaud." It was "an assembly of sober, intelli-

[1] An account of many of these meetings is given in Cobbett's *Political Register* for 1809, vol. xv.

[2] *Memoirs of Henry Hunt*, vol. ii. p. 368.

gent men of property—a fair representation of the sense and the integrity of the county." [1]

Such an awakening of the country, such an instantaneous appeal to the Platform, had never yet been witnessed. How real that awakening was can be judged from a letter by Cobbett "to the Independent People of Hampshire," in which he said: "The reason why your voice has heretofore not been heard is this: that you had no inclination to attend at county meetings. The few who did attend saw that the object was merely a party one; that no good purpose was answered by an attendance; that a set of resolutions, ready cut and dry, were passed without opposition; that the audience consisted upon one occasion of the slaves of men in power; and upon the next occasion of the slaves of men who wanted to get into power; that, in fact, you were only to give your voice for what one party or the other party sent down from London to be passed, and to be sent back again, as being the decision of the county of Hants, when it was no more the decision of the real people of the county than it was the decision of the inhabitants of the moon. No wonder that such meetings had fallen into contempt. The tradesmen and yeomen of the county despised the imposture; and it did not occur to them to take the trouble of exposing it.

"Recent events—quite sufficient for the purpose indeed—have roused us. They have brought us together from all parts of the county; made us acquainted with one another; produced an interchange of friendship; and do very fairly promise to make us formidable to any man, or set of men, who shall dare attempt again to consider us as men of straw." [2]

How considerable an event this revival of the Plat-

[1] Cobbett's *Political Register*, vol. xv. p. 644. [2] *Ibid.*, May 1809, p. 674.

form was is seen from an article of his in the *Political Register*.[1]

"The excellent disposition which has been excited and called forth by the disclosures, is manifesting itself in every part of the country, and this is the really valuable part of the thing. It is not the dismission of the Duke of York that any sensible man cares much about. It is the light, the blessed light that has been let in upon a long benighted nation, by the inquiry that has taken place. . . . Even the provincial papers, so long the vehicles of dull repetition, of borrowed and insipid reflection, have now assumed animation and mind, have now begun to have the breath of life in their nostrils, and to indicate the possession of intelligent souls; . . . at last the people have been roused, beyond the power of all the soporifics in the world, to a sense of the existence of a system of corruption more extensive than they could with reason have supposed to exist."

Hot upon this discreditable disclosure followed some discreditable disclosures concerning Lord Castlereagh, the Secretary for War, who was charged with having placed at the disposal of Lord Clancarty the nomination of a writership in India, for the purpose of enabling Lord Clancarty thereby to procure a seat in the House of Commons.[2] The matter was brought before the House of Commons. Lord Castlereagh acknowledged the transaction, but said he did not think any "turpitude" attached to it, and he disavowed an intention of influencing elections corruptly.

Very little later another charge was brought against Lord Castlereagh, and this time Mr. Perceval, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, was involved.[3] The

[1] April 1809, p. 491.

[2] 25th April 1809, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xiv. p. 203.

[3] 11th May 1809, *ibid.* vol. xiv. p. 486.

charge was that of selling a seat in the House of Commons. "I affirm," said Mr. Madocks, who brought the charge forward, "that Mr. Dick purchased a seat in this House (at the cost of £5000) for the borough of Cashel, through the agency of the Hon. H. Wellesley, who acted for and on behalf of the Treasury; that upon a recent question of the last importance, when Mr. Dick had determined to vote according to his conscience, the noble Lord (Castlereagh) did intimate to that gentleman the necessity of either his voting with the Government or resigning his seat; and that Mr. Dick, sooner than vote against principle, did make choice of the latter alternative. To this transaction I charge the right honourable gentleman (Mr. Perceval) as being privy, and having connived at it;" and he moved that the charge should be heard at the bar of the House. Both the Ministers charged postponed their defence, but so anxious was the House to shield them that a vote was passed by 310 to 85 refusing to take any action on the charge. Refuse the House might to sanction any investigation into particular allegations, but to conceal their general iniquities in these matters was beyond its power, for the practice of buying and selling seats was notorious.

"A bold petitioner has told us," said Mr. Curwen in the House, "'that the seats are bought and sold in this House like the stalls in Smithfield;' and I may remark that to this insult the House thought fit to submit in silence. . . . But, sir, if I needed any proof of the existence of these abuses, besides their notoriety, I might refer to the conduct of the Chancellor of the Exchequer (Perceval), witnessed by the whole House. In a Bill he has introduced to stop the sale of places, etc., he consented to accept a clause inflicting penalties

"on the traffic of seats in this House. Here, sir, is an avowal of the existence of the abuse."[1]

And no less a person than the Speaker of the House, speaking in the Committee on a Bill introduced by Mr. Curwen, said: "The question now before us is no less than this—whether the seats in this House shall be henceforth publicly saleable? A proposition, at the sound of which our ancestors would have startled with indignation; but a practice, which in these days and within these walls, in utter oblivion of every former maxim and feeling of Parliament, has been avowed and justified."[2]

The impression which all these disclosures created, following so quickly on each other, was very great, and men's minds were turned more than ever to the necessity of Parliamentary reform. It was evident that those in whose hands was the government of the country were taking better care of their own interests than those of the country. The disclosures shook the public confidence even in the most exalted public men, and they intensified the desire for such changes as would render such malpractices impossible.

The revival of the Platform in the first decade of this century was due to the frauds, abuses, and corruption which had been laid bare, and was a protest, almost a revolt, against the misdeeds of the Government and its sheltering majority in Parliament.

Nor was the action of the Platform altogether without effect on the Government. At any rate it stung them, as is evident from a petulant speech of Canning, then Foreign Secretary. He said: "The House were told to take care how they acted in contradiction of the sense of the people. But how and where was

[1] 4th May 1809, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xix. p. 357. [2] *Ibid.* p. 837.

the sense to be ascertained? Was it in the Commons House of Parliament, or in those meetings which were held to canvass the conduct of that House? Was the House to listen only to those among them who came reeking from those meetings, and who would inculcate on the House the lessons which they received and brought from such a school? . . . With respect to the scheme which was hatching in these meetings, no man could be in the dark. We had to guard against the machinations of dangerous demagogues; at least when such meetings presumed to bring the conduct of that House to account, that House had an equal right to inquire into and animadvert upon the tendency of their conduct." He called upon the House "to make a determined stand against the encroachments of the factious."[1]

Perceval also (the Chancellor of the Exchequer), on the 4th May, referred to speeches and resolutions out of doors, and complained of the attempt "To delude the public by statements mischievous, false, and fallacious, which were the true characteristics of Jacobinism, and to inflame the public mind with exaggerated pictures of abuse, and imaginary and impracticable ideas of reform.[2]

"If any member of that House, not venturing to make such delusive statements in his place, where they might be met and refuted, should think proper to repeat them in other places, it would not be difficult to appreciate the mischief that might be the result. The language held to the public in these places was, t[illegible]he House of Commons was a sink of corruption, a[illegible] that House was the only place wherein the sen[illegible] people was treated with contempt."

In the country too the subject of Parli[illegible]

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xiv. p. 523. [2] *Ibid.* p. [illegible]

reform was evidently what was uppermost in men's minds, as was apparent from the resolutions which were passed at the meetings in condemnation of the Duke of York's conduct. As an example, the resolution passed at a county meeting at Bodmin in May may be quoted. It was then resolved "that a reform in the representation of the people in the Commons House of Parliament is the only effective corrective of existing abuses, and that the only security against future corruption will be the restoring to the people that share of the elective franchise which the public good requires, and to which they are entitled by the principles of the British Constitution."[1]

Several gentlemen "who had a deep interest in the numerous boroughs in the county" were present, but, notwithstanding their opposition, the resolution was carried by a majority of 50 to 1.

The Platform was given some further encouragement in this matter by the question of Parliamentary reform being raised in Parliament itself. Early in May Mr. Curwen brought in a Bill with the view of checking bribery, and imposing penalties on the sale of seats in Parliament. The Bill did not interfere with or profess to disturb Parliamentary representation, but it dealt with the more discreditable practices of Parliamentary elections, dragged them into the glare of day, and kept the public attention fixed on them for the greater part of the session. In his introductory speech Mr. Curwen gave a [redacted] valuable summary of the character of the meetings which had taken place in connection with the [redacted]ble transactions in which the Duke of York had [redacted] He said: "It is well worth our attention to [redacted]ow the meetings have been composed, as well

[1] Cobbett's *Political Register*, vol. xv. p. 825.

as the language in which their resolutions have been worded. It will be found that they have consisted of the respectable part of the community—of men attached to the Constitution, firm supporters of the throne, not hostile to the administration of the right honourable gentleman, or friendly to those opposed to him. In their expressions will be found nothing to justify alarm, except in the minds of those who profit by abuses. Invariably they point at these abuses, and at the defects in this House, as their source.

"By timely reform you will turn the tide of popular feeling, and convert it into increased affection and attachment to the Constitution. It is true dignity to resist when right and justice are on our side; but it is obstinacy and madness to identify our existence with abuses which we can neither deny nor defend."[1]

The argument did not commend itself to all.

Mr. Windham opposed the Bill. "It had for many years been his opinion that the House ought strenuously to oppose, as dangerous and mad, any proposal for Parliamentary reform."

The Government, however, were wiser, and under the stress of Platform agitation, took the Bill under their wing, but altered it considerably, and then allowed it to become law.

Before the close of the session the subject of the reform of Parliamentary representation was brought before Parliament by Sir Francis Burdett, who offered to the House a plan of reform, not, he said, for its "immediate adoption, but for its future consideration."[2] But the House preferred another course not mentioned by Sir Francis Burdett—namely, its immediate rejection, and rejected it straight off.

[1] Hansard, vol. xiv. p. 355, 1809.

[2] *Ibid.* p. 1041, 15th June.

The growing irritation of the Government proves conclusively, I think, that public opinion, as expressed by the Platform, was becoming more powerful and making its pressure increasingly felt. In a debate which took place quite early in the following session[1] (29th January) on a breach of privilege as to the form of publication of certain lists of how members had voted, one of the members, Mr. Ponsonby, had taken occasion to remark that "there was one thing which gave him great satisfaction by the debate, and that was the particular anxiety which was, at that time, manifested about the opinion of their constituents." The Prime Minister (Perceval), with evident irritation, replied that "He did not know what there was in the present state of affairs that should make it matter of so much exultation to the right honourable gentleman, that members should be anxious about the opinions of their constituents, nor did he know why they should be more anxious on that subject at present than at other times."

But their rising wrath and increasing vindictiveness was shown still more in another matter which occurred about this time, and which was connected with that to them most detested of institutions, the Platform. There was in existence at this time a certain debating Society called "The British Forum," of which Mr. John Gale Jones, who is already familiar to us, was president, a not very formidable or influential institution.[2] It held its meetings in a room in Bedford Street, Covent Garden, which was hired one evening in each week by Jones and some three or four others, and the profits derived from the admission money were shared among them. "Debating Societies," says Place, "were at one

[1] See *Parliamentary Debates*, 1810, vol. xv. p. 216. [2] *Ibid.* vol. xv. p. 480.

time much more numerous and better attended, but they had been gradually falling into disrepute, and at this time none but this existed, and even here the attendance was by no means numerous,"—sometimes only Jones and his friends.[1] Public notices were usually issued of its proceedings. On a particular occasion a certain debate took place there, which was thus referred to in a public notice: "Last Monday, after an interesting discussion, it was unanimously decided that the enforcement of the Standing Orders, by shutting out strangers from the gallery of the House of Commons, ought to be censured as an insidious and ill-timed attack upon the liberty of the Press, as tending to aggravate the discontents of the people, and to render their representatives objects of jealous suspicion." And this subject being too interesting a one to drop, a further debate was fixed. The notice ran as follows: "Windham and Yorke. British Forum, 33 Bedford Street, Monday, 19th February. Question (for debate), Which was a greater outrage on the public feeling—Mr. Yorke's enforcement of the standing order to exclude strangers from the House of Commons, or Mr. Windham's recent attack upon the liberty of the Press? . . . The great anxiety manifested by the public at this critical period to become acquainted with the proceedings of the House of Commons, and to ascertain who were the authors and promoters of the late calamitous expedition to the Scheldt, together with the violent attacks made by Mr. Windham on the newspaper reporters (whom he represented as bankrupts, lottery office-keepers, footmen, and decayed tradesmen), have stirred up the public feeling, and excited universal attention. The present question is therefore brought forward as a comparative

[1] Place, MSS., 27,850, p. 156.

inquiry, and may be justly expected to furnish a contested and interesting debate."

Mr. Yorke (First Lord of the Admiralty) brought the subject under the notice of the House of Commons, and declared it was a gross violation of their privileges,[1] and the printer was ordered to attend. He attended and gave up the name of the author of the placard as John Gale Jones.

"Jones," says Place, "was always a poor emaciated crazy-looking creature, possessed of considerable talents, but as devoid of judgment as any man could well be. He had, on former occasions, shown a want of personal courage."[2] On this occasion he attended and apologised, but it was determined he should be made an example of; it was resolved that he had been guilty of a gross breach of the privileges of the House of Commons, and he was committed to Newgate.

A short time after, Sir F. Burdett, the popular member for Westminster, issued a letter to his constituents declaring the committal of Gale Jones to have been illegal, stating a long argument to prove its illegality, and denying the power of the House of Commons to imprison the people of England.[3]

This, after a long debate, was adjudged by the House of Commons to be a libellous and scandalous paper, and a warrant was issued for the committal of Sir F. Burdett to the Tower. Serious riots took place on his arrest, and his conveyance to the Tower; the military was called out to quell them, and lives were lost. Popular feeling was greatly excited by these

[1] This same Mr. Yorke, soon after, had a valuable sinecure given to him. On accepting it he vacated his seat, and at the end of twenty years, in which he had represented the county of Cambridge, again presented himself to the freeholders, but was hooted out of the county. See Place, MSS., 27,850, p. 158.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] See *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xvi. p. 137.

events; and the overbearing intolerance of the Government in endeavouring to suppress an insignificant debating Society recoiled on themselves in an outburst of Platform activity, and in giving the Platform the greatest impetus it could well receive. On the 17th April a meeting of the electors of Westminster was held, "probably the largest ever held in Westminster," and a "Petition and Remonstrance addressed to the House of Commons was presented, asking that their representative might be restored to them, and that the House would take the state of the representation of the people into serious consideration."

The Petition was presented after a long discussion, and laid on the table.

Place, who so often takes us behind the scenes, says: "It was a matter of indifference to a large body of the electors what the House did with the Petition, and many wished the House to reject it, as then another meeting would be held. What was most desired was a wrangle in the House. Everybody knew that, so far as the House alone was concerned, it was useless to petition it; no Petition had ever been entertained as it should have been; none had ever been taken into consideration; no part of the prayer of any Petition had ever been granted. But the House was the best vehicle through, or by which the people could be addressed, and a wrangle in the House when reported in the newspapers was sure to fix the attention of the people on our proceedings."[1]

Shortly afterwards, on the 26th April, a meeting of the freeholders of Middlesex—never backward where liberty was threatened—was held, and a Petition for Sir Francis Burdett's release was also adopted.

[1] Place, MSS., 27,850, p. 218.

The Petition was outspoken. The Chancellor of the Exchequer declared that he conceived it impossible to consider the Petition in any other light than that of a deliberate and unparalleled insult to the House,[1] and moved that it be not received, and it was not received.[2] A "Petition and Remonstrance" was also adopted by the Lord Mayor, Aldermen, and Livery of the city of London at a meeting in the Guildhall on the 4th May. Its rejection was moved by Mr. Secretary Ryder, and it was rejected.[3]

Meetings were held throughout the country. The Platform was soon actively at work, and Petitions flowed in.[4] Worcester, Canterbury, Hull, Nottingham, Coventry, Sheffield; Berkshire, all petitioned. The language used was strong; and what was more unpleasant, they all demanded Parliamentary Reform. The idea was evidently burning itself ever deeper into the people's minds and hearts that there could be no good government, no cessation of abuses and grievances, until Parliament was reformed.

As if to point the necessity of reform, another great public scandal came to light, and the country was again reminded of corruption in high official quarters—a Mr. Joseph Hunt, a "Treasurer of the Ordnance," and a member of Parliament, having been ascertained to have been guilty of misapplying a large sum of public money, nearly £100,000, whilst he held that office.

The Corporation of London, not to be daunted by the treatment its Petition had received at the hands of the House of Commons, returned to the charge, and sent another Petition to the House.

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xvi. p. 780.

[2] 58 voted for its being received; 139 against.

[3] For receiving it, 36; against, 128.

[4] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xvii. p. 114, etc.

"This time," says Place, "though it may, I think, be called the most offensive of any presented to the House among those which were rejected, it was 'ordered to lie upon the table.'" It was a long and vehement enumeration of some of the iniquities of the Government, and must have been unpleasant reading to the majority of the members of Parliament had they not felt secure from any action of the people. But, beyond occasional Platform speeches and occasional speeches in Parliament, the popular party could do little. The Ministry was too powerful to be shaken, and the issues involved in the war were still so tremendous and so vast that home affairs were completely subordinate.

Shortly before the end of the session John Gale Jones was released. Sir Francis Burdett's detention expired only with the prorogation of Parliament, which took place on the 21st June. Place tells us that "Parliament had during the whole session been uncommonly agitated, was very uncomfortable and greatly annoyed by motions, petitions, and proceedings of the people all over the country, and was very desirous of a prorogation."

The episode had been a most useful and inspiriting one for the Platform, just giving at a critical time that impetus which was necessary to keep it in action.

It would appear, however, that there was much in Platform action at the time which was to be deprecated, though not condemned in the way the Government of the day condemned it.

Earl Grey (the Mr. Grey of 1793), in a speech in the House of Lords, referring to outdoor agitation, in which of course the Platform was included, said: "I am not ignorant of the degrading artifices by which popular applause is acquired — artifices with which

"neither virtue nor talents have any connection; arts which men possessed of neither are best fitted to practice; men such as we have lived to see in the present day, who, renouncing the obligations of faith and honour, breaking through all the bonds and engagements that hold society together, have, in their career of foul slander and dirty calumny, entirely set themselves above all the decencies of private life, above all the courtesies which men who really endeavour to discharge their duty, willingly concede to their adversaries." . . . And he further alludes to "the basest misrepresentations and vilest delusions practised by men who, without any regard to truth, sacrifice every virtuous and really patriotic object to the shouts of a vulgar clamour."[1] The language is strong, and only applicable to an extreme section of those using the Platform.

Moreover, the Platform was in its early days when these words were spoken; and it would be unreasonable to expect it to have been blameless and free from defects and objectionable features.

But even with its many defects the Platform was doing most useful work, and whatever could be said against it, this must be said for it, that, where it was not in existence, popular agitation and discontent took a more objectionable and dangerous form. In the winter of 1811-12 the distress of the people became very great, and their restlessness under it took a more organised form than had yet been seen in the country.

According to the Report of the Secret Committee of the House of Lords, which was appointed to investigate the subject, "The disposition to combined and disciplined riot and disturbance seems to have been first manifested in the neighbourhood of Nottingham,

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xvii. p. 573.

in November 1811, by the destruction of a great number of newly-invented stocking-frames by small parties of men. By degrees the rioters became more numerous and more formidable. Many were armed."[1] Early in December the outrages extended in some degree to Derbyshire and Leicestershire.

"The spirit of riot and disturbance was extended to many other places," parts of Cheshire, Ashton-under-Lyne, Eccles, and Middleton. At the latter place an attack was made on a mill which was defended by force, and five of the rioters were killed. A few days later a dwelling-house was burnt, and again there was loss of life, several of the rioters being killed or wounded. On 14th April 1812 riots occurred at Stockport. Riots also took place at Manchester, "of which the general pretence was the high price of provisions."

At West Haughton a manufactory was burned down by rioters. The contagion spread to Wigan, Warrington, Carlisle, and into Yorkshire. The machinery in a mill at Tentwhistle was utterly destroyed, and Mr. Horsfall, a respectable merchant and mill-owner in the neighbourhood of Huddersfield, was shot in broad daylight, and died of his wound. At Rawdon and other places the machinery in several of the mills was destroyed; nightly seizures of arms also took place. . . . "The causes alleged for these destructive proceedings have been generally the want of employment for the working manufacturers, the application of machinery to supply the place of labour, and the high price of provisions."

A very similar report was made by the Committee of the House of Commons.[2] Cobbett, in commenting on this latter, very pertinently remarked: "There was, it

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxiii. p. 1030.

[2] See the Report, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxiii. p. 951.

"seems, no evidence of a *setting on*, no evidence to prove a plot. The Ministry can find no *agitators*. It is a movement of the people's own as far as it goes." [1]

This was perfectly true, but what is more, and for us the point of the whole matter, is that in all the accounts of this first industrial convulsion on an extended scale, of the first blind throes of a suffering people towards the amelioration of their condition, there is no allusion to the Platform or to meetings, no accounts of speeches, incendiary or otherwise. These people attempted no verbal complaints that should reach the outer world, no discussion of their grievances; they adopted no Addresses, no Petitions, no Remonstrances; they were too sunk in ignorance to know, too devoid of leaders to have the chance of learning that there was a better way of seeking redress than that which they were adopting, though posterity knows that the Tory Parliament of the time was not much disposed to listen to the people's complaints.

Even Lord Sidmouth, that most inveterate and bitter foe of the Platform, and all pertaining to it, though declaring that the outrages were fomented by persons who had views and objects in fomenting disturbances, could not fasten the responsibility of the disturbances on the Platform, but was obliged to admit that "the conduct of the rioters might be, in some degree, traced to the high price of provisions and the reduction of work." [2]

Other men of larger views more distinctly declared this to be so.

Brougham said, "The disturbances were so much connected with distress, that they might be directly traced to it."

[1] *Political Register*, vol. xxii. p. 99.

[2] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxiii. p. 796.

Whitbread said, "The origin of the disturbances was distress, high price of provisions, want of employment;" under such circumstances popular discontents could always thrive.

Certainly the Platform was not responsible. In process of time that form of popular agitation would come, a step to a higher and better order of things. Now the suffering people, voiceless, and leaderless, took the remedy into their own hands; they worked at night —nocturnal meetings and depredations—they worked silently, secretly; secret oaths and undertakings bound them together, and they sought relief by riots, assaults, destruction of machinery, house-burnings, mill-burnings, and even murder—a much worse way of expressing discontent than by the Platform.

Though several of the rioters were made amenable to the law and punished, the state of parts of the country continued very serious, and Lord Castlereagh declared in the House of Commons that the powers of the Government were not sufficient to deal with the disturbances. There was no Platform to legislate against, no public meetings to prohibit, no speeches to silence, and so the Bill which the Government introduced had to be moderate in its scope. The Government contented themselves by giving the magistrates power of immediately dispersing a tumultuous body, whether at night or day, and making those who did not disperse liable to the penalties for misdemeanour; also certain other powers not needing recital here.

The measure so introduced, and subsequently known as the "Peace Preservation Act," was passed on 29th July, and was to continue in force till the 25th March in the following year.

Whilst ignorant discontent was thus venting itself

in disturbances, only to bring down further suffering and misery on the participators therein, an example was given of discontent in the more educated classes, displaying itself through the Platform, and with a different ending. The celebrated Orders in Council, which were devised as a retaliation on France for the decrees of Napoleon against English trade, had resulted in producing great commercial distress at home. Petition after Petition, many emanating from public meetings, poured into Parliament against these orders. The table of the House of Lords was covered with them. The table of the House of Commons still more so. They were not from the men who were rioting and burning down houses, but from mercantile men, and from artisans. Lord Stanley, taking the Petitions as his justification, moved that the House should resolve itself into a Committee to consider them. His motion was acceded to, and the inquiry lasted six weeks, during which time a mass of evidence was collected. When the inquiry had concluded, he moved for the repeal of the Orders in Council, and the Government undertook to suspend their operation for a time, pending communication with America.[1]

On the 29th September 1812 Parliament was dissolved, and another of those "periods of liberty"—a general election—took place. But the franchise was unaltered, the boroughmongers were as numerous as ever, and the Liberal party lost ground rather than gained. Many of the popular members lost their seats, owing more to the selfishness of borough owners than to any oscillation of popular opinion. In England only 2 counties were contested, in Wales 1; in England only 39 boroughs, and in Wales 5, or a total of 47

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxii. p. 1092.

contests.[1] In Scotland 1 county was contested, though any Scotch contest was purely nominal; thus there were only 48 contests for the 558 seats in Great Britain, the smallest number since 1774.

Sir F. Burdett, summing up the result, said: "The late appeal to the people, as they called it, rather savoured to damp his hopes of success (as regards Parliamentary reform) than otherwise. When he cast his eyes over the representation of the country, he saw no great bodies of men who were permitted to choose their representatives."[2] There were, indeed, only one or two encouraging signs about it. One was that during the election it had been no uncommon thing to see a candidate put to his political catechism, and made to give a distinct account of his opinions in a sort of way never done before; and the other was the prominence of one or two contests between eminent public men. Liverpool was contested by Canning, who had been Foreign Secretary, and Brougham, then a leading spirit of his party. The latter gave a most instructive account of the work of the Platform on the occasion.

Writing to Lord Grey in October 1812 about the election, he said: "You can have no idea of the nature of a Liverpool election; it is quite peculiar to the place. You have every night to go to the different clubs, benefit societies, etc., which meet and speechify. This is from half-past six to one in the morning at least; and you have to speak to each man who polls, at the bar, from ten to five. It lasted eight days. I began my canvass three whole days before, and had nine nights of the clubs, besides a regular speech each day at close of the poll. I delivered in that time one hundred and

[1] See the *Register of Parliamentary Contested Elections*, by H. S. Smith, London, 1842.

[2] *The Examiner*, p. 815, 1812.

"sixty speeches and odd; and yesterday and to-day, after being beaten, I rallied and delivered regular speeches to the whole multitude. I had to close with one above an hour long, so you may guess how exhausted I am, especially as I never saw a popular election before. I knew nothing of it. The exploits of the Whigs were my chief subjects, and I flatter myself I have done much to reclaim the people there." [1]

The exploits of Canning deserve more notice. He had evidently taken up the mantle which had fallen from Fox's shoulders, so far as the Platform was concerned, but he had turned it inside out, and was using it now for Tory instead of popular purposes.[2]

His is absolutely the first instance of a Tory who had held high office, and naturally expected to hold it again, regularly using the Platform. "He has shown," says Cobbett, "a greater fondness for speech-making than any of those whom he and his associates have heretofore reproached for such practice."

His speeches were probably as numerous during the election as Brougham's, as he spoke every day at the close of the poll, and in one of his speeches he begged to be excused from making a longer speech on the ground of the necessity under which he was to attend in the course of the evening upon several meetings of freemen. No sooner was the election over, than we

[1] *The Life and Times of Lord Brougham*, written by himself, 1871, vol. ii. p. 62.

[2] Mr. Thomas Kaye, in his *Collection of the Speeches of the Right Honourable George Canning delivered on Public Occasions in Liverpool*, p. xiv., which he published in 1825, wrote: "Mr. Canning is, so far as our recollection serves, the first British senator who has valued himself upon maintaining a constant intellectual intercourse with his constituents, and who has seized every opportunity of personally inculcating, with all the vigour of his commanding talents, those political opinions which he had invariably advocated, and with such splendid success, in the Commons House of Parliament." But as I have already shown, precedence must be given to Fox.

find him haranguing, as Platform opponents called it, at a dinner at Manchester, delivering a regular party leader's speech.

In the following year, after the session was over, we find him again speaking at Liverpool. "As the representative of Liverpool, I am most happy in meeting my constituents again, after a year's experience of each other and a year's separation." Had his constituents been at his door, as Fox's were, it is probable his harangues would have been as numerous as Fox's.

His speeches have, moreover, this special characteristic which belongs to the higher class of Platform oratory, that they were addressed not merely to his constituents, but to the larger public without. Both the subjects which he selected to speak about, and his treatment of them, were on a very different level than the ordinary hustings eloquence of the time; and the fact that so great a man, and one who had filled such high station in the government of the country, should resort to the Platform for the purposes of acquiring additional popularity and power, is the most remarkable testimony to the position already reached by the Platform.

CHAPTER IX

THE SECOND SUPPRESSION OF THE PLATFORM

THE long war, that titanic struggle of twenty years' duration, which had been waged by England for her very existence, at length came to an end.

Peace came at last. The icy blasts of a Russian winter had wrapped one whole French army in a snowy pall, and the gleaming bayonets and indomitable courage of British soldiers had routed another. France, unable longer to carry on the contest, succumbed, and a treaty of peace was signed on 30th May 1814.

For twenty years the kingdom had been straining every nerve in the struggle, money had been poured forth with the most lavish hands, burden after burden had been piled upon the people, the dread of invasion had frequently kept the country in a fever of anxiety, political reforms were declared to be barred, everything had had to give way to the one overwhelming imperative necessity of war.

War had become almost the natural state of life. A generation had grown up in war, and their ideas were habituated to it; political parties were regulated by their approval or disapproval of it; agriculture and manufactures and commerce had shaped themselves to the circumstances and requirements of war; Govern-

ment itself was carried on in the atmosphere of war. And now all was to be different. The war clouds had broken, and were rolling away, the horrible ever-present nightmare was disappearing. Men could breathe freely again, could think of something else than war, could lift up their heads and look about them, and endeavour to adapt themselves to their altered and wider life.

We now can but dimly realise what the change was. It was like the raising of a siege, like stepping on shore after a long and perilous sea voyage, like recovery from a desperate and critical illness. Life, as it were, was to begin again, scope was once more to be afforded for energies long restricted and confined, and forces long dormant were to spring into action.

Though political life and action had been more or less in abeyance during all the long years of the war, a gradual process of education and enlightenment had been going on among the people, an increased comprehension of the principles and practice of Government, an increasing sense of a just, moral claim to a share or voice in the management of public affairs, and an increased desire to take part in them. The complete freedom of speech in Parliament, and the publication of the debates or discussions there, had encouraged freedom of thought amongst the people outside, and habituated them to greater freedom of discussion. Public interest in the proceedings of Parliament had grown keener, the growth of the Press had given those proceedings a wider circulation, and the public, from repeated experience, were growing ever readier to criticise the action of Parliament, and to protrude their views, opinions, and judgment on the Legislature. Population had increased, and great centres of industrial activity grown into being, and with the increasing population a growing

restlessness had been showing itself among large masses of the people. Nor can we be surprised at it, for there was not much inducement to them to rest.

Causes of discontent were numerous. The monopoly of political power in the hands of so small a part of the nation, the enormous and excessive influence of the Crown, the shameful and now exposed abuses in the exercise of patronage and the administration of the public funds, the almost unbearable burden of the taxes—all these were there to urge men, once war had ceased, to agitation for reform, social, political, or material; and with greater knowledge and more enlightened intelligence on the part of the people, the agitation was certain to be more serious, more determined, and more pertinacious than it had ever been before.

The crisis would, under any circumstances, have demanded much ability and tact on the part of the political leaders successfully to surmount, but the Government aggravated the difficulties of the time by a policy which, however consonant with the prevailing ideas, was most disturbing in its results, and once more provoked the Platform into action.

The landed interest was still regarded by the governing powers of the time as the most important interest in the country. To it all others had to make way. Commercial and manufacturing interests weighed almost as nothing against it. If grain was dear, and the rent of land was high, the country was pronounced to be in a state of sound prosperity, no matter how trade and commerce languished. If the price of grain fell, and the farmers could not afford to pay a high rent, cries of lamentation and woe instantly arose as to the distressed state of the country. The consumer was thought nothing of, was of no consideration whatever in

those days; the landed interest, or to be more precise, the landlord interest, was the predominant one; and inasmuch as the landlord interest was overwhelmingly predominant both in the House of Commons, and in the House of Lords, legislators took very good care of their own interests. The arguments by which they justified the legislation for their own advantage are as entertaining and worthless as those which the borough-mongers used against proposals for a reform of Parliament; but that they utilised their power to secure to themselves a monopoly, at the cost of every other class in the country, shows how unfit they were to be trusted with the power they had, and is the strongest possible condemnation of the then existing system of representation.

The benefit to be derived from the legislation which was now being contemplated by the landed interest exclusively and entirely affected the landowners. This cannot be too clearly understood; and as, some five and thirty years later, the Corn Laws were the subject of a tremendous agitation, hereafter to be described, this point can with advantage to a true conception of the question be stated here.

Whether wheat was 120s. or 60s. a quarter was a matter in which the labourer had no interest whatever, so far as his wages were concerned. If he got higher wages when the price was high, and as a rule he did not, he had to pay higher prices for his food and clothing. And as regards the farmer, it came to the same thing if he got a low price for his produce, and paid a low rent, or got a high price for his produce, and paid a high rent—his share of the profits was the same. The landlords, therefore, were the only persons who profited by high rents.

To keep rent high—that was their one object. That could only be done by making the produce of the land as dear as possible, and that could only be secured by shutting out foreign competitors, and thus "protecting" home-grown produce. The evils resulting from natural scarcity were bad enough, in all conscience, but for Parliament to pass a law in the interests of its own members and class, creating artificial scarcity, was almost the most heinous offence it could be guilty of.

Since 1791 a sliding tax had been imposed on imported corn,—that is to say, an import tax which diminished as the price of home-grown corn increased, or increased as the price of corn diminished. In 1813, when prices were not quite as high as was deemed desirable, the landed interest had prevailed upon Parliament to appoint a Committee to investigate the Corn Laws. The Committee made the monstrous recommendation that wheat should have reached the starvation price of 105s. a quarter before the importation of that article should be permitted.[1]

In the following year another Committee sat. The Committee observed that the sudden removal of the impediments to importation, which, during the war, operated to check the importation of foreign corn, had created among the occupiers of land a certain degree of alarm.

During the war, more particularly in the latter part of it, rents had been fabulously high, and the landlords had so long enjoyed the advantages of high rents that when peace came they were determined, if possible, to secure the continuance of a state of things which enabled them to live more luxuriously and to keep up greater state than otherwise they could have done.[2] This fact

[1] See *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxv., Appendix, p. lv.

[2] This is confirmed by Francis Place.

finds confirmation in the action of this Committee, which, more moderate than its predecessor hinted at the protection price being raised from 63s., at which it had latterly stood, to 80s. per quarter.

The manifest object of these Committees was to pave the way for an Act of Parliament to prohibit the importation of corn, until home-grown corn would sell at such a price as would enable the grower to grow it, and to pay as high rent for land as he had recently been paying. In February 1815 the Government announced its intention of prohibiting the importation of foreign wheat until the price of 80s. per quarter had been reached for home-grown wheat, and a Bill to this effect was accordingly introduced.

"We do not propose," wrote Lord Liverpool with a sort of generous consideration, and as if deserving of thanks for his moderation, "to push the protective price beyond 80s. a quarter. I am satisfied, however, that such a price is desirable for the purpose of giving a proper stimulus to the agriculture of this country." [1]

But if part of the country was in favour of such legislation, another considerable part was against it, as enhancing the price of food, and adding to their difficulties of existence.

Parliament being a packed assembly of landowners, inaccessible to complaints in such a matter, the people's sole resource for the expression of their views was the Platform. To it they appealed, and the country burst out into meetings and platformings.

Already in 1814 meetings had been held, and Petitions adopted against any alteration of the Corn Laws. Now, in the early part of 1815, meetings against

[1] See *Life and Administration of Robert Banks, Second Earl of Liverpool*, by C. D. Young (1868), vol. ii. p. 136.

the Bill became general throughout the country, and again do we find the civic industrial population giving evidence of their existence—this time on a far wider scale than their first movement just after the French Revolution. Petitions poured into Parliament from nearly all parts of the kingdom. From Lancashire Petitions came signed by 118,000 persons; from Yorkshire likewise a large number. A Petition came from Manchester signed by 54,000, setting forth "the unequivocal and unanimous opinion of the petitioners, that the Bill was the most unadvised and injudicious measure ever brought forward; that the petitioners were convinced that it would have the effect of raising the price of labour, and diminishing the demand for our manufactures."

"The Petition," said Mr. Philips,[1] "came from a quarter not remarkable for public meetings; for the practice there was, if a requisition to convene one was sent to the proper officer, a counter one was sent by a greater number, and consequently no meeting was assembled. This practice went to discountenance the fair and constitutional expression of public feeling."

However, on this occasion, a meeting was held. The newspapers of the time contain no reports of the speeches delivered at the meeting, nor any comments thereon, so little was the Platform thought of still by the local press.[2]

Bristol also had a meeting, and sent a Petition signed by 40,000 persons; Leeds sent a Petition signed by 24,000.

In Kent a meeting was convened at Maidstone in support of the Corn Law, but the High Sheriff, inad-

[1] See Speech by Mr. Philips, M.P., Hansard, vol. xxx. p. 8.

[2] *Historical Sketches, etc., of Manchester,* by A. Prentice, p. 71.

vertently, perchance, appointed the meeting on the market-day. The result was, as Lord Darnley pathetically complained to the House of Lords,[1] "that all the rabble attended, together with the workmen from the paper manufactories, and a number of idle discharged servants, who raised such a clamour that he could not be heard; and the landowners and occupiers of land had to adjourn to an inn in the town, where certain resolutions and the present Petition were agreed to."

The proposed measure had been introduced on the 17th of February, and was pressed forward by the Government with such precipitate haste that the distant parts of the country could scarcely get time to express an opinion on it.[2] Indeed, the Government laid themselves open to the charge, to all appearances a true one, that they wanted to force the Bill through Parliament, without giving time for adequate discussion, either by Parliament or the country. The hurry of the measure was a great cause of the uneasiness out of doors.[3] In London, unfortunately, the people passed beyond the Platform and endeavoured to carry their views by riot.

"The mob, as a mob," wrote a contemporary paper,[4] "are little worth certainly, but as an organ which, on such occasions, only gives fiercer vent to the opinion of the community at large, which expresses with violence what others represent with temper, it is not to be despised even as giving a judgment on the question. It is the disregard of petitioners, and not of mobs, against which we would chiefly protest."

As a rule, however, the people carried on their agitation without violence or disturbance. "In Man-

[1] Hansard, vol. xxix. p. 1166.
[2] See Mr. Baring's Speech, Hansard, vol. xxx. p. 10.
[3] See Hansard, vol. xxx. p. 72.
[4] *The Examiner*, 1815, p. 170.

"chester and Liverpool the public peace was in no degree disturbed. Notwithstanding the public anxiety which prevailed in all the populous towns from which Petitions had been presented no disturbance had occurred. Indeed, the public meetings upon this subject were generally remarkable for a degree of order and decorum, which might be held out as an example to much more exalted assemblies."[1]

A great meeting of the merchants, bankers, and traders of the city was held in London. "There never was assembled a more orderly meeting," and a Petition was adopted, and having been signed by 40,000 persons, was presented to the House of Commons on the 6th of March. "Numerous Petitions were presented by different members from nearly all parts of the kingdom praying that no alteration might be made in the Corn Laws."

A great meeting was held in Westminster. "The Palace Yard was entirely filled," and a Petition to the House of Commons was adopted and signed by 42,000 persons. One or two paragraphs from it throw much light on the popular feelings of the time, and explain some of the causes of the popular discontent.

"That on the unexpected and fortunate return of peace, it was reasonable to hope that this forced and unnatural state of things would be, in a great degree, corrected;[2] that the rent of land and the prices of provisions would be reduced; that some of the more grievous and burthensome taxes would cease; that commerce would flow into its accustomed channels; that a stimulus would be given to our manufacturing and trading interests by the freedom of intercourse

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxx. 1815, p. 71.

[2] Hansard, 1815, vol. xxx. p. 110.

with foreign nations; and that all classes of our fellow-subjects would participate in those blessings and advantages to which they had formerly been accustomed in times of tranquillity.

"That your petitioners have, however, noticed with extreme concern and anxiety the introduction into your honourable House of a Bill relative to the importation of corn, which, if passed into a law, must necessarily and directly produce, and, in the judgment of your petitioners, is intended to produce, a great permanent increase in the price of one of the first necessaries of life, for the sake of enabling the proprietors and cultivators of land to maintain undiminished a splendid and luxurious style of living, unknown to their fathers, in which they were tempted to indulge during the late war, so highly profitable to them, and so calamitous to most of their fellow-subjects."

Carried by huge majorities of those who called themselves representatives of the people, but who were in reality representatives solely of their own interests, the Bill reached the House of Lords. Here numerous petitions awaited it, amongst others one from a Wiltshire county meeting held at Salisbury on the 8th March.

"That your petitioners, at the moment when they were justified in expecting to enter on the enjoyments of the blessings usually attendant on peace, to which they had so long been strangers, perceive with the deepest sorrow that attempts are making to prolong and perpetuate the sufferings of war by enhancing and upholding the price of corn."[1]

This self-same county meeting had also passed a resolution which shows the angry state of mind of many on this subject.

[1] Cobbett's *Political Register*, vol. xxvii. p. 293.

Resolved—"That political corruption, after having exhausted all the other sources of taxation, has at last proceeded to the outrageous length of attempting to burthen with a heavy tax the very bread that we eat, being thereunto urged and encouraged by the false statements of certain rapacious landowners; that, therefore, a Petition be presented to the House of Lords, praying their Lordships to interpose in behalf of this long-insulted and long-suffering nation, in such a manner as to prevent the enacting of any law to prohibit or restrain the free importation of corn."

In the House of Lords the progress of the Bill, despite all Petitions, was as rapid as it had been in the House of Commons. One argument alone was offered there in its support which deserves notice.

Lord Liverpool, in moving the second reading of the Bill, urged in its defence the necessity for rendering England as independent as possible of foreign supplies.[1]

"A nation of 10,000,000 to 20,000,000," he said, "could not suffer itself to be dependent on foreign supplies for the necessaries of life without the most palpable impolicy and the greatest danger."

But this necessarily implied that the limit of England's power and population was fixed by the amount of the produce of the national soil. That, happily, was not quite what other Englishmen thought, nor, had they thought it, would it have been a feasible policy.

As was very pertinently asked by Sir Robert Peel, "Was it intended that we should for the future only live on the produce of the land?" If so, England had already nearly reached the apex of her might.

To the last the Platform did its best. One afternoon, namely, on the 20th of March, the House of Lords

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxx. p. 177.

was occupied "for nearly two hours" in receiving Petitions on the subject of the Corn Laws.[1]

The consideration given to them by their Lordships was shown by the fact that there and then they immediately proceeded to read the Bill a third time, and to pass it!

Though the agitation was thus unsuccessful, it was not without effect. The Platform had made a gallant struggle; it had roused additional numbers of the people to political activity; it had brought a new and momentous topic within the range of their discussion; it had brought new classes within the sphere of its influence—consequences all tending to the growth and power of the Platform in days to come.

Concurrently with unsuccessful agitation against the new Corn Law, the Platform was also being brought into use against the continuance of the "Property Tax," or, as it is more generally known now, the "Income Tax." This tax had always been regarded as a war tax, and throughout the war had been very high—at one time (1805) having been as much as two shillings in the pound. When peace came, people might naturally have thought that the great war expenditure would come to an end, and have expected that this tax would be discontinued. But as the Government never made any popular concession without pressure, the aid of the Platform was invoked against it; and through the autumn and winter of 1814-15 meetings were held, speeches made, and Petitions adopted to Parliament, asking for its discontinuance. Numerous county meetings took place. Norfolk, Hampshire, Somerset, Durham, Hertford, Berkshire, and Middlesex all held meetings.

At the Norfolk meeting, on 11th January 1815,

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxx. p. 256, 20th March.

the Earl of Albemarle was amongst the speakers, and his speech gives an excellent illustration of the character of these meetings, and of the arguments used at them. "It was," he said, "a constitutional right of Englishmen—a right inherent in them—to assemble together for the purpose of thus publicly expressing their opinion of the proposed renewal of the tax. . . . The tax was oppressive because it was unequal. It was ruinous as well to the higher as to the lower classes among us. . . . We are now at peace with America, indeed with the whole world, and he could not see upon what grounds Ministers could now continue this tax. Lord Liverpool writes to his friends that it might be found necessary to continue the tax a year longer, which, in the cant phrase of Ministers, was but feeling the public pulse. Let them know by your proceedings this day that your pulse is felt, and that it beats with indignation at this attempt, and that they are not thus to violate their word, pledged as it was to the country for the expiration of this abominable tax. The very proposition for a continuance of it is founded on a breach of honour and faith. . . . Ministers must be compelled to give up this tax by the common voice of the people. Remonstrate constitutionally and you will be relieved. The language of Ministers is too arbitrary for England." [1]

The inhabitants of Westminster, always in the front where political action was required, held a large meeting in Palace Yard, and adopted a Petition against the tax, and meetings were also held in York, Bristol, and Liverpool for a similar purpose. In one important respect this agitation differed from that against the Corn Laws, namely, that in this one a large number of

[1] See *The Examiner*, p. 77.

the upper classes joined in the movement. The result was that it was more successful. So strong was the agitation against the tax, that the Chancellor of the Exchequer, on introducing the Budget, on the 20th of February 1815, stated, "That it was not his intention to propose any further continuance of the Property Tax."[1] A "private and confidential" letter from the Prime Minister to Lord Castlereagh, written on the same day, explains the policy of the Government, and to the discerning reader throws a brilliant flash of light on other things besides. "The truth is, the country at this moment is peace mad," wrote Lord Liverpool. "Many of our best friends think of nothing but the reduction of taxes and low establishments, and it is very doubtful whether we could involve the country in a war at this moment for objects which, on every principle of sound policy, ought to lead to it. This, like all other popular sentiments in a country such as ours, will wear out; but after such a contest for twenty years, we must let people taste something of the blessings of peace before we can expect fairly to screw them up to a war spirit, even in a just cause."[2]

Before any of the blessings of peace could be secured, before the people could feel the benefit of the success of their Platform agitation against the tax, Napoleon escaped from Elba, was received with acclamation by France, the country was once more plunged into war, and the tax was reimposed. Happily the struggle was of short duration, the glorious victory at Waterloo was won, and within a hundred days the fate of England, and of Europe, was decided.

The final overthrow of Napoleon, and his removal

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxix. p. 853 (1815).

[2] *Life and Administration of Robert Banks, Second Earl of Liverpool*, by C. D. Young (1868), vol. ii. p. 105.

from the sphere of European politics, at last secured the hopes of permanent peace. Peace with America too was settled, and Britain could at last rest from the strife, could convert her soldiers' swords into ploughshares.

Peace that had long been looked forward to, long hoped for, long prayed for—peace that was to bring innumerable blessings in its train, plenty, and comforts, and ease, and happiness—peace had come, but with it, at first, deep misery and bitter disappointment. The distress which had shown itself in 1812 had gradually deepened and spread. The repeal of the Orders in Council had caused such a violent rebound in trade that the exportation of manufactured goods had been overdone, and the results had been fresh commercial distress, a prodigious diminution in the demand for manufactures, and a serious diminution in the demand for the produce of land.

The cessation of the war led to the sudden diminution in the expenditure of the Government to the amount of £50,000,000,[1]—a result which, though most satisfactory in itself, had the unfortunate effect of deranging the markets both for manufacture and produce; and the new Corn Law, while enhancing the cost of food against the consumer, was still inefficient in keeping prices up to that high level to which landowners had been accustomed, and which they deemed necessary for their welfare.

"What!" exclaimed Mr. Western in the House of Commons, when moving for a Committee of the whole House on the subject of agricultural distress—"what must be the situation of a country like this, when the

[1] From £125,000,000 to £72,000,000. See Brougham's Speech, Hansard, vol. xxxiii. p. 1102, 9th April 1816.

land paid no rent, when the wages of labour were not equal to the sustenance of the labourer, and when the profits of agricultural stock were turned into losses? Such was the actual situation of the country, burdened in addition with a heavy national debt, and an enormous taxation to support establishments of unprecedented magnitude."[1] Mr. Brand endorsed this description. "The calamities which the agriculturists in many parts of the country were enduring, the miseries under which that class were groaning, presented a picture of wretchedness which might rend the most callous heart."[2] Distress instead of plenty, misery instead of comfort—these were the first results of peace. A Tory newspaper of the day summarised the state of things in the words: "Peace is felt by almost all classes as a calamity."

Distress and hardships ever set men's minds working for political changes, and so now the people took into their own hands the consideration of their state and the discussion of the remedies. Their first disappointment was that when peace came the war taxes, amounting to about £25,000,000 a year, were not at once stopped. Principal among these was the Property Tax, which yielded some £14,000,000.[3]

The day after the opening of Parliament, namely, on 2d of February 1816, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who, one would have thought, should have learned wisdom from the proceedings of the previous year, stated that he proposed to continue the Property Tax, with some modifications, for two or three years. Instantly the people betook themselves to meetings, to platformings, to petitions against the tax in a way they had never done before. The country was agitated from

[1] Hansard, vol. xxxiii. p. 667, 1816.
[2] *Ibid.* p. 670.
[3] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxii. p. 432.

one end to the other. Petitions were poured into the House of Commons, and as nearly every Petition originated at a meeting, and was the result of Platform discussion and a good deal of Platform speaking, some idea may be formed from the number and the nature of the Petitions of the position which the Platform was coming to occupy in the public mind. The resolutions passed by one meeting may be taken as an example of the others, and of the text on which the Platform was enlarging.

On the 21st of February 1816 a county meeting of the gentlemen, clergy, freeholders, and inhabitants was held in Hampshire, at which it was resolved: "That the exigencies of the late war were the causes assigned by the Legislature for the extraordinary impost, called the 'Property Tax.'" [1]

"That, by the express terms of the several statutes imposing the said tax, the faith of the Legislature stands pledged; that its duration should be limited by the war that gave birth to it."

"That the intention, avowed by Ministers, of proposing a further continuance of the said tax in this time of profound peace is in direct violation of the sacred word and faith of Parliament, and in utter disregard of the general voice of the people conveyed to the House of Commons in the last session."

A Petition was agreed on, and the members for the county were "instructed" to present it to the House of Commons, and to "support the prayer thereof to the utmost of their power."

Cobbett, commenting on the agitation at the time, wrote: "But the people of all ranks have taken the alarm, and are now bestirring themselves in a manner

[1] Cobbett's *Political Register*, vol. xxx. p. 226.

that I have never before seen them, since I have known anything of public affairs. The country gentlemen, so long dead to all those feelings which distinguished their ancestors, so long sunk in a sort of unaccountable apathy, so long the tame followers of every Minister . . . instead of taking, as they formerly did, the lead in deciding on questions of war or of taxation, this description of persons, so long dead to their country, seem at last to be stirring into life." [1]

And he further remarked: "The struggle (about the income tax) is a novel spectacle.[2] I do not recollect any very serious opposition ever having been made before to a tax of any sort. The opposition itself is something new; but the description of persons (namely, the country gentry) who have now appeared on the stage is also new, and this is a matter of much greater importance."

A great meeting was held at Westminster in opposition to the tax—some 40,000 it was said,—"Westminster which is to England what the heart is to the human body." Day after day, sometimes in thirties and forties, the Petitions were presented to the House.

Mr. Madocks, in presenting one from Boston, said: "He was directed by his constituents, especially charged, to give every support in his power to the Petition." He censured Ministers for pressing the subject forward with such indecent haste, and said, that "Parliament ought to be considered anything rather than a mere registry of the Ministers' edicts, and their ready instruments for laying burthens on the nation." [3]

Night after night long debates took place on the Petitions, the Government refusing to give way, and showing their fangs in irritation.

[1] Cobbett's *Political Register*, vol. xxx. p. 260, 2d March.

[2] *Ibid.* p. 290.

[3] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxii. p. 875.

Lord Castlereagh[1] inveighed against "the ignorant impatience of the people to be relieved from the pressure of taxation"; and on another occasion said that "Gentlemen on the other side of the House attempted to clamour down this taxation instead of arguing the question."[2]

Mr. Tierney remonstrated and said: "The voice which the country had raised against that execrable tax showed a proper and becoming spirit, and the noble lord called it clamour." At last, on the 18th March, the Chancellor of the Exchequer brought forward his motion for the continuance of the tax. He ignored the worth of the Petitions.

"The Petitions," he said, "contained only the sentiments of a very small proportion of the people. . . . The petitioners had only attended to the pressure upon themselves, which they were naturally anxious to remove, because they thought it no longer necessary.[3]

"He was persuaded that such would not have been their judgment if they had had an opportunity of being fully acquainted with the whole matter, and of deliberating calmly and impartially upon the subject. He was the more convinced that the petitioners had not understood the subject, and had never coolly and impartially considered it, when he observed that almost all these Petitions contained the unfounded allegation that the Government and Parliament stood pledged that the tax should cease with the war."[4]

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxii. p. 455.

[2] See his disavowal of these phrases a month later, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxiii. p. 459.

[3] Hansard, 1816, vol. xxxiii. p. 421.

[4] The pledge was to be found in the 247th Section of the Property Tax Act: "Be it enacted that this Act shall commence and take effect from the 5th April 1806, and that the said Act, and the duties thereof, shall continue in force during the present war, and until the 6th April next, after the definitive signature of a treaty of peace, and no longer." — See Brougham's Speech, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxiii. p. 450.

As it happened, however, on this occasion it was the Chancellor of the Exchequer who was wrong. The Platform was in the right.

Lord Castlereagh expressed his views on the subject more fully: "He begged to be understood as speaking with all due deference of the Petitions which had been presented to that House upon the subject; but when he considered what ought to be the influence of those Petitions, no one would say that the deliberative faculties of Parliament ought to be so limited or paralysed by them, that the Legislature of the country was to look to the sentiments entertained beyond the walls of that House for the rule and guide of the course it had to pursue.[1] . . .

"With respect to the Petitions generally, there was a great mass of them, and many of a most respectable description. But when he looked at them in the aggregate, and asked himself whether they could be considered as containing the sentiments of the whole people of Great Britain, he was compelled to give his negative to such a proposition. In fact, one-fourth of the counties of Great Britain had not petitioned at all. There were not more than nineteen Petitions from counties, out of nearly ninety of which Great Britain was composed.[2] . . . Full one-third of the Petitions presented came from two counties only—Devonshire and Middlesex,—a circumstance which was explained by the mode of obtaining them in separate parishes.

"The aggregate amount of Petitions was about 400, and 130 came from those two counties."

For once, and only once, these autocratic Ministers

[1] Hansard, vol. xxx. p. 443.

[2] For the sake of effect Lord Castlereagh most disingenuously included Scotland in this calculation, but the Scotch counties were wholly in the hands of the Tories. They were much on a par in every respect with the rotten boroughs.

were to receive such a slap in their faces as would make their cheeks tingle for many a long day.

When the division came 201 members voted for the continuance of the tax, and 238 voted against it, and the Government was defeated by 37 votes. The result was almost as great a surprise as was the triumph of Dunning's celebrated motion on the increase of the influence of the Crown in 1780.

Such a crushing defeat, due mainly to the expression of the people's will through the Platform, might naturally have been expected to lead to the resignation of the Ministry. On many other occasions a less serious defeat has resulted in the resignation of Ministers; but unfortunately, on this occasion, though the defeat should have led to their dismissal, there was no party to take their place.

Lord Castlereagh, the leader of the Government in the House of Commons, declared that "their system for sustaining the credit of the country had been broken in upon," yet accepted their defeat, and the next night the Chancellor of the Exchequer emphasised the acknowledgment of their defeat by announcing their intention of giving up the war duty on malt, against which comparatively little outcry had been raised.

In examining the cause of this unexpected success of the Platform against a Ministry backed by their own dependents and the nominees of boroughmongers, the explanation is to be found in the additional aid which the Platform received on this occasion from some of the classes who usually stood aloof from it. The tax fell heavily on the country gentlemen and many of the wealthier classes. Anxious to get rid of it they joined the lower classes of the people in agitating

against it; and the result was a fresh and distinct triumph for the Platform.

The marked difference that such co-operation caused was soon after to be exemplified, for even while this agitation was going on, another had begun, which, not alone, they did not join, but actually opposed; and the result was very different — this was the agitation for Parliamentary Reform. The question, though occasionally dormant, never for one moment sunk out of mind. It had been kept alive in Parliament by an occasional motion on the subject. Outside Parliament, no matter what subject engrossed the attention of the Platform for the time, the reform of the representation was invariably tacked on to it. Reform was the panacea for all evils, all distresses, the one cure for all official delinquencies. The recent agitations had given it a fresh impetus, and now a definite agitation for it commenced. "We are arrived," wrote Cobbett, "at a new era.[1] Those sentiments of justice and humanity, and that love of freedom, which have been smothered for so many years past by the outcry against Jacobins and levellers, and by the dread of revolution and bloodshed, have never been wholly extinguished, and they now begin to be openly expressed." And Place, who was a close observer of contemporary events, has also left a record for us in his opinion of the state of things at this time.

"When Mr. Pitt came into power in 1784 there was no public . . . only factions. . . .[2] The French Revolution produced a great change; it induced men to look beyond party squabbles, to inquire whether there was not something of much more consequence than the

[1] *Political Register*, 30th March 1816, vol. xxx. p. 398.

[2] Place, MSS., No. 27,809, p. 41.

"contest of the factions as to which of them should possess the power and emoluments of the Government, and they began slowly to detach themselves from the factions. The number which now began to think for themselves in respect to Government increased. Many men saw, or thought they saw, information was necessary to produce good government; they comprehended their own ignorance, and sought for information. The number of such persons was at first small, but it was constantly increasing; and it was obvious to every thinking man that unless they could be retained in a state of comparative ignorance, the power of the Government would diminish, and that, too, in proportion to their number and their knowledge. . . . Much knowledge had been acquired during these thirteen or fourteen years; it was principally, and indeed almost wholly, confined to the younger portion of the community, and only to part of them; but the advance was obvious."

With the revival of the Platform in the agitation for economy and retrenchment on the termination of the war, it was but natural that the increased knowledge, self-reliance, and energy of some amongst the people, should at the same time endeavour to find voice through the Platform for the great object which they had most at heart—Parliamentary reform.

Political clubs also to a small extent revived. At the close of 1814 or the beginning of 1815, Major Cartwright, the veteran reformer, projected an association under the title of the "Hampden Club," with the object of working for Parliamentary reform. It was this club "which gave the tone to many places and revived the dormant desire for reform."

"With the decline of the *éclat* of the conquest of

France, discontent returned with distress in redoubled force. . . . The people looked to Parliament for relief, but a boroughmonger House of Commons was not disposed to attempt anything not likely to promote its own immediate views of interest. Retrenchment and reduction to any great extent would injure ministerial influence. There was scarcely any one in the House to stand up for the people, and no one who had courage and industry sufficient to investigate and expose the base and pitiful conduct of ministerial agents." [1]

In May there were disturbances and riots in Suffolk—mobs, without a Platform, but with a banner, "Bread or Blood." In Norfolk attacks were made on millers, and bakers' shops, and flour and bread was stolen. In the Isle of Ely alarming riots took place. The rioters were even designated as "insurgents," not suppressed without military, and powder, and ball, and loss of life, to be followed by a special Commission, and hangings, and transportation. In Bideford, in Durham, in Huntingdonshire, riots more or less grave occurred—all for food. No meetings had been held here; there was no Platforming to be charged with incitements to riot; nothing but those worst of all causes—distress and hunger.

One meeting which looms out of this sad period explains clearly the system of government, against which the people, awakening from their long quiescence, were beginning to kick. Whilst England was in this state of dismal distress, whilst mobs were exchanging shots with the military in their struggles for bread, and were parading with "bread or blood" banners, and people were starving, and the Government at its wits'

[1] Place, MSS., No. 27,809, p. 13.

end for money, the marriage of a royal princess—the Princess Charlotte of Wales—took place to a German Prince, and Parliament, at the instigation of Ministers, passed an Act giving to the newly-married couple £60,000 for an outfit and £60,000 a year. It was true she was heir-presumptive to the throne, and that she was very popular, but the annual charge was a heavy one, and if her husband survived her, he was to receive an annuity of £50,000. A residence was also to be bought for them. A county meeting for Kent was convened, and held at Maidstone on the 17th of June, for the purpose of an address congratulating the royal family on this marriage.[1] The speeches were interrupted with cries of "Send up a Petition for employment for the poor," and "We can't afford to keep foreigners," and other cries, and finally the meeting voted against the Address.

"£60,000 a year to the Princess Charlotte," wrote Place. "£1150 a week, £192 a day for every working day in the year to be given to a woman who never did anything for it—to a woman and a man who can never do us any service,—a monstrous sum taken from the pockets of people, some of whom die of hunger in our streets."[2]

As the summer went on, the distress spread, commercial difficulties reached an alarming height. London took the lead as regards meetings, and from the Platform appealed to the Government, and to the outer world. On the 21st of August 1816 a large meeting was held in the Common Hall, the Lord Mayor presiding, and a Petition to the Regent was adopted, setting forth the state of distress that prevailed, and asking him to call Parliament together.

[1] See Cobbett's *Political Register*, vol. xxx. p. 801, etc.

[2] Place, MSS., 27,809, p. 30.

One resolution set forth: "That this distress is the natural result of the corrupt system of Administration, and of a long and profligate waste of the public treasure."

Another: "That our national distress imperiously demands the most prompt abolition of all useless places, and sinecure pensions, and the immediate adoption of the most rigid economy."

Another: "That long experience has but too fully proved that the only efficient hope of the people is in themselves united, to exercise their constitutional powers, in order to secure a free, full, and frequent representation of the people in the Commons House of Parliament; the want of which representation having been the primary source of our multitudinous evils, the possession of such a representation will be the only tranquil, sure, and effectual mode of obtaining indemnity for the past, and security for the future. . . . That we earnestly recommend to every county, city, town, and parish in Great Britain immediately to assemble, and to direct their efforts to obtain a reduction of the taxes—a system of rigid economy in every department of the Goverment, the abolition of useless places and sinecures, and a reform of Parliament.[1]

On the 11th September a large meeting was held in Westminster Palace Yard. It was addressed by Henry Hunt, who had by this time risen into notoriety as a Platform speaker, and by Sir Francis Burdett, member for Westminster, who was the successor to Fox, filling the *rôle* of moderate and respectable democracy on the Platform, and of extreme liberalism and independence in the House.

A short summary of their speeches on this occasion will convey something of the spirit of the Platform at

[1] *The Examiner*, 25th August 1816 p. 543

this time, as displayed by some of its most extreme votaries.

Hunt said: "He would speak plain facts, and call things by their right names. The general distress was now acknowledged by every class of persons, except the tax-gatherers, and those who lived on them. There was no doubt that all our distresses had their origin in a want of a proper representation of the people. The immediate cause of our distress was, the carrying on for upwards of twenty years a war, cruel, and bloody, and unjust, against the liberty of all mankind—a war, the expense of which had ruined our commerce, and reduced us to beggary and distress."[1] . . . He then proceeded to inveigh against sinecures and placemen: "Would it be believed that upwards of £200,000 of the people's money was paid to placemen having seats in the House of Commons." He proposed that a Petition should be addressed to the Prince Regent to call Parliament together—"Not as it had usually been called together to divide the spoils of the people amongst themselves, but to receive the Petitions of the people and to attend to them. . . . It was time the voice of the people should be heard and attended to."

Sir Francis Burdett said: "That meeting showed the spirit of Westminster, and he trusted that it was but a sample of that which would be shown in every part of the kingdom. Their enemy was formidable, and deeply intrenched behind forms of law, as well as rows of bayonets, and nothing would conquer that enemy but a firm union among all classes of the country. . . . No Englishman ought to look to the *sham causes* of the distress held out to them by the boroughmongers; the real cause consisted in the cor-

[1] *The Examiner*, 15th September 1816.

rupt state of the representation of the people. . . . Let it be remembered that nothing was more dreadful in the ears of the oppressors than the voice of the oppressed." He inveighed against the national debt, against the oligarchy in the House of Commons: "That oligarchy had a hundred hands in every man's pocket, and almost everything, great or small, found its way into its immense net. . . . He trusted that there would be meetings in every county, and every great town in England. This oligarchy would not give up its plunder unless it were forced."

As the autumn went on meetings for Parliamentary reform became more frequent. Early in October there was a meeting of some 7000 to 8000 persons at Bolton; a little later one at Southwark.

On the 29th of October a county Cornwall meeting was held at Bodmin, the High Sheriff presided. "The Shire Hall was completely filled."[1] Mr. Rashleigh made a most able and argumentative speech:[2] "The interest excited by his observations," wrote the reporter, "was evident by the profound attention of the meeting, only interrupted by those bursts of applause which, like electric sparks, were continually elicited from all present by the convincing and energetic eloquence by which he traced all our privations and sufferings to their true source—the corrupt influence exercised by the Government over the majority of a House of Commons neither participating the feelings nor expressing the sentiments of the people because not chosen by them." The principal resolution declared that the abuses in the Government of the country were to be traced to the defective representation of the people, and a Petition was

[1] See *The Morning Chronicle*, 5th November 1816.

[2] For his speech see *The Morning Chronicle* of 9th November.

adopted. On the same day a great meeting was held at Glasgow, of which some details are interesting as showing what use was being made of the Platform to teach and elevate the people.[1] The meeting was "the largest that ever took place for any political purpose in Scotland; about 40,000 persons were at it. The greater part of those present were of course workmen, but such was the general order that not the slightest injury was done to any article on the ground" ("not even the boxwood border of the enclosure," says the sympathetic reporter, with some pride), "and the whole was conducted with a decorum which strikingly proved how groundless had been the prejudice against popular meetings."

Among the speakers was a Mr. Gray, who, after referring to the "overwhelming load of indescribable calamity that existed," said: "Retrenchment and reform constitute the only remedy for the present distress, and to the attainment of these indispensable objects let all our efforts — let the efforts of the whole nation — be steadily and constitutionally directed. Let the cry of 'Retrenchment and Reform' be sounded at the foot of the throne from every corner of the island. . . . The whole system of expenditure must be reduced. All those noble, sturdy beggars must also be discharged, who have fostered themselves like leeches upon the State, to suck from it every remaining portion of its vitality. The people must have their legal share in the Government of the country —they must have representatives of their own choosing. Nothing short of a thorough retrenchment ought to satisfy them—nothing short of a radical Reform can

[1] See *The Morning Chronicle* of 5th November 1816, which quotes the account from *The Glasgow Chronicle*.

save them. The sacrifices they have made deserve some consideration. Their sufferings demand it. . . . Let all the wise and the virtuous unite. If the union be constitutional, and for constitutional objects, who shall dare to control or counteract it. While truth lies at the centre, the national mind must thither gravitate. A nation guided by truth is not to be resisted. Do we calculate on too much when we expect retrenchment and reform from discussion and petitioning? Are we without example or encouragement in looking for the recovery of our lost liberties and prosperity from the diffusion of knowledge, that best light of the mind? How triumphed Luther, an obscure monk, over combined potentates, one of them wearing the triple crown? In defiance of their armies, spread he not religious reform over whole nations? And was it not by bold discussion, and a resolute diffusion of knowledge, that our illustrious countryman, John Knox, redeemed Scotland from the miserable follies and abominable superstitions of Popery? To doubt, therefore, the efficacy of union and discussion is unworthy of an enlightened or a constant mind."

Nottingham also at this same time held a meeting and adopted a Petition to the Regent, which gave a graphic picture of the distress, and which was rather outspoken in its terms.

"Our manufacturers withdrawing their remaining capital from engagements they find to be unproductive or ruinous, our artisans and labourers destitute of employment, our workhouses crowded beyond all precedent, and our poor-rates swelled to an extent which, if not speedily alleviated, must have the effect of involving us in total and irremediable ruin.

"At a period of national distress like the present,

"when we are called upon to sacrifice the comforts of our families to answer the demands of the Government, when the iron hand of taxation is extorting from the rich man his last guinea, and ransacking the poor man's scrip for his solitary penny, to see a voracious band of placemen, pensioners, and sinecurists wallowing in the wealth thus wrung from the hard earnings of honest industry, is a violation of common decency without a parallel in the annals of corruption; nor can it surprise your Royal Highness that your subjects murmur with discontent and remonstrate with indignation."[1]

Hostile comment may be made on such resolutions and such speeches, but it is to be remembered in extenuation, first, that "in a state of suffering men cannot be expected to choose their expressions with a courtly precision, but the complaint itself may be well founded, however unguardedly expressed"; and next, that the people were being almost entirely left to their own devices. Except men like Major Cartwright, who was a feeble though well-meaning man, and Henry Hunt, they had few leaders. In London Sir Francis Burdett, and a few other gentlemen of position, took a considerable part in the agitation. Here and there, in some of the counties, there were also some able men of respectable position who did the same; but their influence did not extend beyond their own immediate neighbourhood, and in the large towns the people had absolutely no one to guide them or to help them.

"Do the nobles of the land, our hereditary guardians, do they call public meetings? Do they or any of them attend public meetings to instruct the people, and point out the road to good government, to independ-

[1] *The Examiner*, 13th October 1816.

ence, to happiness? No, not they. They call no meetings; they attend no meetings; they do all they can to prevent meetings; they would have all quiet—quiet as death." [1]

The leading reformers at this time were of a different class from the aristocracy. Bamford, in his *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, has described those of Lancashire; in other places they were much the same.

"A cotton manufacturer," "letterpress printer," "shoemaker," "stonecutter," "weaver," "hatter," "clogger," "tailor," "draper." — "Such," he says, "were the names and conditions of all whom I recollect as standing prominently forward in those days, through evil and through good report, in one district of the country. Such were they in life's station who cast the seeds of living bread in the wilds of Galilee."

However hostilely the Government and Tory party may have regarded the meetings which were taking place throughout the country, one good effect was following them. Cobbett has described it.

He wrote: "The country, instead of being disturbed, as the truly seditious writers on the side of corruption would fain make us believe, instead of being irritated by the agitation of the question of reform, is kept by the hope which reform holds out to it, in a state of tranquillity wholly unparalleled in the history of the world under a similar pressure of suffering. Of this fact the sad scenes at Dundee are a strong and remarkable instance. At the great and populous towns of Norwich, Manchester, Paisley, Glasgow, Wigan, Bolton, Liverpool, and many others, where the people are suffering in a degree that

[1] Hone's Prospectus of his Register quoted by *Quarterly Review*, vol. xvi. p. 546 (1817).

"makes the heart sink within one to think of, they have had their meetings to petition for reform; they have agreed on petitions; hope has been left in their bosoms; they have been inspired with patience and fortitude, and all is tranquil. But in Dundee, where a partial meeting had been held early in November, and where a gentleman who moved for reform had been borne down, there violence has broken forth, houses have been plundered, and property and life exposed to all sorts of perils."

And again, a little later, he recurs to the same matter: "Rioting has ceased as meetings for reform have increased. At Dundee, and in the Isle of Ely, and in Suffolk, and at Birmingham, where there have been riots, there have been *no* meetings for petitioning. In short, meetings for petitioning have put an end to rioting. And this is very natural; because, when meetings are held, and the people's attention is drawn towards the real causes of their misery, they at once see that the remedy is not a riotous attack upon the property of their neighbours, and they wait with patience and fortitude to hear what answer Parliament will give to their Petitions." [1]

Bamford attributes much of the improvement to another cause, namely, Cobbett's writings. "Their influence," he says, "was speedily visible; he directed his readers to the true cause of their sufferings—misgovernment; and to its proper corrective—Parliamentary reform. Riots soon became scarce, and from that time they have never obtained their ancient vogue with the labourers of this country." [2]

From the provinces the scene of Platform action was once more transferred to the metropolis, and rapidly

[1] 11th January 1817, *Political Register*, p. 40. [2] Bamford, vol. ii. p. 7.

became more interesting and exciting. Here Henry Hunt was taking a conspicuous part.

Place has given a description of this celebrity. "The reformers," he says, "were active in their endeavours to induce the people to conduct themselves peaceably, and incessantly to petition for reform as the only means by which such relief as was in the power of the Government to grant could be obtained.[1]

"They succeeded to a great extent in exciting a spirit of co-operation, which was, however, much damaged by the conduct of Henry Hunt, who had placed himself at the head of the common people. He was impudent, active, vulgar; in almost all respects the best mob orator of the day, if not, indeed, the best which had ever existed."

On the 15th November 1816 a meeting was held in the open air at Spa Fields, "To take into consideration the propriety of petitioning the Prince Regent upon the distressed state of the country."[2] The meeting was composed of the working people, at the head of whom Henry Hunt had placed himself. Hunt took the lead at it, "and used his utmost exertions to inflame the passions of the people against every man who had shown himself at all desirous to do them service."[3] At about half-past twelve o'clock a hackney coach containing four persons was seen to drive into the Fields. The Reverend Mr. Parkes mounted on the roof and made a speech. He exhorted them to be firm and bold in the present important crisis. "Now was the time when the people should exert themselves to their utmost for the maintenance of their rights and liberties, and be like the bursting of waters, carrying all before them.[4] . . .

[1] Place, MSS., 27,809, p. 16.
[2] *The Examiner*, 1816, p. 730.
[3] Place, MSS., 27,809, p. 22.
[4] For full report see *The Examiner*, 1816, p. 730.

"The cause was good, and their enemies were possessed with a trembling heart. Now was the time, the important moment, when the tyrants should be made to suffer; and if the nation were unanimous, bold, and intrepid, strengthening themselves with a just sense of their own injuries, the supporters of corruption would tremble before them."

About one o'clock Hunt appeared. His approach was preceded by a three-coloured flag and a cap hoisted on a pole. He commenced his harangue from one of the windows of the front room of the public-house.

"They had met for the purpose of petitioning the Prince Regent and the Legislature for some effectual relief to those growing miseries, the tale of which would require a month to tell, and a month fully to understand. . . . What was the cause of the want of employment? Taxation. What was the cause of taxation? Corruption. It was corruption that had enabled the boroughmongers to wage that bloody war which had for its object the destruction of the liberties of all countries, but principally of our own. . . . They had now in their view the British Bastile (pointing to Coldbathfield's prison), where so much tyranny had been formerly exercised, and to which so many miserable victims had been consigned. . . . All ranks save the children of corruption, who fattened on the vitals of the country, were alike involved in one common distress. . . . He knew the superiority of mental over physical force; nor would he counsel any resort to the latter till the former had been found ineffectual. Before physical force was applied to, it was their duty to petition, to remonstrate, to call aloud for timely reformation. Those who resisted the just demands of the people were the real friends of confusion and bloodshed; . . . but if the fatal

day should be destined to arrive, he assured them that if he knew anything of himself, he would not be found concealed behind a counter, or sheltering himself in the rear. Everything that concerned their subsistence or comforts was taxed. Was not their loaf taxed? was not their beer taxed? were not their shirts taxed? was not everything they ate, drank, wore, and even said, taxed? What impudence, what insolence was it then in the corrupt and profligate minions of Government to say that the people suffered nothing by taxation. If there were no taxes the labourer would have his quartern loaf for 4d., his pot of beer for 2d., his bushel of salt for 2s. 6d., his soap, candles, sugar, tea, and other articles for half their present price. It was necessary to have some taxes, he allowed, but every dictate of justice, every right of the people called for their reduction. They were imposed for no purpose in which the nation was interested. They were imposed by the authority of a boroughmongering faction, who thought of nothing but oppressing the people, and subsisting on the plunder wrung from their miseries." He produced a book, which, he said, "contained a list of those who gorged and fattened on the spoils of an oppressed nation—of those who devoured the taxes, under which they were crushed to the earth." He then went on to inveigh against pensions and sinecures, of which he mentioned several instances. "Taxes appeared to be extended not only to paying the judges, etc., but in pensioning the fathers, the brothers, the mothers, the sisters, the cousins, and bastards of the boroughmongers, and all sorts of paupers." He referred to "an impudent fellow called George Canning—a man who had the audacity, the unparalleled insolence, to call the people of England a swinish multitude, offscourings, and all sorts of oppro-

brious epithets. Swinish multitude was the most delicate name they received. (Great commotion). . . . It was the duty of every man to petition for a reform in Parliament." He abused the Whigs and "the Tories," and concluded with exhorting the advocates for reform to exert all their efforts to attain that most desirable object, and he moved the adoption of a Petition to the Regent.

The Petition besought the Regent "To take into his consideration the burden of this suffering, and patient, but starving people; and implored his Royal Highness to cause Parliament to be assembled, in order that measures might be adopted to redress the evils described, to feed the hungry, and to clothe the naked, so that the unhappy and starving people might be preserved from desperation; and, above all, to listen, before it was too late, to the earnest and repeated prayers of the nation."[1]

The Petition was adopted, and after some further speeches the meeting dispersed, being adjourned to the 2d December. When it was over, a small mob proceeded through some parts of the town and robbed some bakers' shops. "They were, however, quickly dispersed, and by nine o'clock all was quiet. Bodies of the military were in attendance in various quarters."

A meeting of the Common Council of London, held on the 28th November, and presided over by the Lord Mayor, again bore testimony to the prevailing distress.

One of the resolutions set forth, "That the distress and misery which for so many years has been progressively accumulating, has at length become insupportable. It is no longer partially felt, nor limited to one portion of the Empire; the commercial, the manufacturing, and the agricultural interests are equally sinking under its

[1] *The Examiner*, 1816, p. 732.

irresistible pressure, and it has become impossible to find employment for a large mass of the population, much less to bear up against our present enormous burthens." [1]

Another resolution set forth a list of the causes of the distress, "all arising from the corrupt and inadequate state of the representation of the people in Parliament, whereby all constitutional control over the servants of the Crown has been lost, and Parliaments have become subservient to the will of Ministers." A Petition for the assembling of Parliament was adopted.

The 2d December was the day to which the Spa Field's meeting of the 15th November had been adjourned. The meeting was fixed for one o'clock at the same place.

"An hour before the time named for that meeting," says Place, "a crazy creature called Dr. Watson, a profligate son of his, as crazy as his father, and several of their associates mounted tricoloured cockades, and endeavoured by their speeches to persuade the people there assembled to revolt against the Government." [2]

At the conclusion of a violent speech, young Watson exclaimed, "If they will not give us what we want, shall we not take it?" and seizing a tricolour flag, he jumped out of the waggon in which he was, among the people, and "led off a portion of the rabble to take possession of the Tower of London, and overturn the Government."

His invitation, however, was only accepted by a very small portion of those present—some few hundreds at most. These attacked some gunsmiths' shops, shot at, and wounded a man who resisted them, and stole some arms.[3]

[1] *The Examiner*, 1816, p. 765.
[2] Place, MSS., 27,809, p. 22.
[3] Bamford, vol. i. p. 25.

The intended attack on the Tower resolved itself into one man, Preston by name, mounting a wall, and summoning the guard to surrender. "The men gazed at him—laughed; no one fired a shot; and soon after he fell down, or was pulled off by his companions, who thought (no doubt) he had acted the fool long enough."

The rebels fled at the first sight of a dragoon. Several arrests were made, quiet was restored, and the attempted "insurrection" was quickly at an end.

The whole business was from beginning to end utterly contemptible, so far as any possible effect on the Government was concerned. It was devoid of a single capable leader—the few desperate men who took the lead were miserably poor—the ammunition for the capture of the Tower, the overthrow of the troops, and the subversion of the Government was all stowed in "an old stocking."

Place says: "There was manifest danger to the lives and properties of the peaceable citizens, yet this contemptible set of fools and miscreants, which twenty constables could have dispersed in five minutes and taken the leaders into custody, were permitted to march through the city unmolested."[1]

"The regular meeting," he continues, "was held at the time appointed. Mr. Hunt took the chair, and the first resolution passed had reference to the proceedings of those who had left the meeting for mischievous purposes. It was worded thus:[2]

Resolved—"That it is always a proof of the badness of any cause or any argument, when its advocates resort to acts of violence; and therefore we condemn, not only all breaches of the peace, but all demonstrations of a

[1] Place, MSS., 27,809, p. 22.

[2] See *The Examiner*; also Place, MSS., 27,809, p. 23.

wish to commit acts of violence against any of our opponents; and we shall regard as the worst enemies of ourselves and of our country all those (if any such there should be) who may be base enough to commit any such acts on this occasion."

Other resolutions having been passed, and a Petition to the House of Commons having been agreed to, "the meeting quietly dispersed." Place goes on to say: "Yet it will be seen that in all the speeches in Parliament, and in all the proceedings in courts of law, the conduct of some who appeared on the ground before the time appointed for the meeting, and went away before the meeting commenced, is spoken of as THE meeting, whilst THE actual peaceable meeting is unnoticed, the rioters being alone called the meeting in Spa Fields."[1]

It has been necessary to enter into these details, because it is desirable to clear the Platform from the allegations afterwards brought against it in connection with this meeting, and also from the discredit and stigma which the Government endeavoured to fix on the whole movement for Parliamentary reform, by representing such men as the two Watsons, Thistlewood, and others of that set, men who afterwards committed high treason and were hanged, as leaders and participators therein. Hunt, even, who was extreme enough, quickly realised what they were, and would have nothing to say to them.

Of the agitation generally Cobbett has given us a summary. In January 1817 he wrote: "There have been held meetings at which Petitions have been signed for a reform of Parliament by more, I believe, than half a million of men. And at no one of these meetings has

[1] See also Hunt's own account of the meeting given in his *Memoirs*. *The Morning Chronicle* of 3d December also asserts that the rioters had no connection with the meeting.

"any riot taken place."[1] . . . And commenting on these meetings, he remarked: "The mass of information which has been discovered at the several public meetings seems quite surprising. . . . The accounts of those proceedings show a degree of wisdom and talent very far surpassing anything that was ever brought forth at public meetings in this or any other country.[2] At Nottingham the corporate body, like men of sense, have cordially acted with the people; but at Manchester, Wigan, Boston, Lynn, Glasgow, Paisley, Renfrew, and divers other places, all persons in authority have either thrown obstacles in the way, or refused to participate. This, however, has not at all held the people in check. They know their rights, and they have come forward and exercised them with talent and spirit, and, at the same time, with the greatest possible prudence."

For us now the material fact is, that first the Government, and somewhat later, Parliament, found themselves face to face with such a development of the Platform, and such an agitation for Parliamentary reform, as had never before been seen.

Great accordingly was their wrath; and what still further excited their anger was the fact that, following somewhat the precedent of 1780, delegates from various petitioning bodies for reform met in London for the purpose of arranging as to the presentation of the Petitions, and of discussing a Bill to be presented to the House of Commons embracing the reforms sought for. They met on the 22d January 1817 at the invitation of the Hampden Club of London, of which Sir F. Burdett was the chairman. The number of delegates was not great. Some seventeen or eighteen had been "elected";

[1] *Political Register*, January 1817, p. 39.

[2] *Ibid.*, 21st December 1816, p. 666.

others assumed the title of delegate without any nomination: Hunt, Cobbett, Major Cartwright were among the number, but the meeting was a contemptible affair, and they squabbled bitterly among themselves.

"Ministers," writes Place, "took advantage of this absurd proceeding. The meeting of deputies was treated as something bordering on open rebellion, and was by far the most useful incident for enabling them to alarm the timid. The ministerial newspapers were indefatigable in magnifying every movement into treason and sedition; all the talent, all the acrimony, all the malignity and falsehood which the most venal, and corrupt, and base among the basest of mankind, as some of the fellows connected with the newspapers are, had their full swing against the reformers. Every loyal slave, every one whose situation in corporations was gainful, or who expected to gain, was active in his way; nothing was, in fact, left undone which a vile administration, to which no one thing of any kind, however mean and base, was unacceptable, which was likely to promote its purposes, and yet, after all, the alarm did not come up to their expectation."[1]

. . . . . .

And now history was once more to repeat itself, with the most extraordinary fidelity. The Platform had showed itself, as in 1790-95, a popular power, only this time a far greater power than it was then. It was again to be struck down by Acts of Parliament, worded almost exactly the same as those in 1795, and supported by speeches almost a repetition of those then delivered. Even to the very incident which was the starting-point of the excuse for the repressive legislation of 1795, the similitude between the two periods was absolutely perfect.

[1] Place, MSS., 27,809, p. 34.

On the 28th of January 1817, when the Prince Regent was returning from the House of Lords after opening the session of Parliament, and was "passing at the back of the garden of Carlton House, the glass of his carriage was broken by a stone, as some represented it, or by two stone balls, fired from an air gun, as others stated it, which appeared to have been aimed at his Royal Highness."[1]

Parliament, shocked by the outrage, immediately adopted addresses of congratulation to him on his escape. The Regent sent a message of thanks to each House, and followed it up, a few days afterwards, with another, saying that he had directed that there should be laid before them papers containing information "respecting certain practices, meetings, and combinations in the metropolis, and in different parts of the kingdom, evidently calculated to endanger the public tranquillity, to alienate the affections of his Majesty's subjects from his Majesty's person and Government, and to bring into hatred and contempt the whole system of our laws and Constitution."[2]

In accordance with the well-worn precedent of 1795 and subsequent years, Secret Select Committees were appointed to consider this information. While they were investigating the subject, and considering their report, Petition after Petition for Parliamentary reform poured into both Houses of Parliament, more especially into the House of Commons.

The first of the Petitions presented was from over 15,000 people at Bristol. It and several others were presented by Lord Cochrane. "The deputies, together with perhaps 20,000 persons, having waited till it was

[1] See Lord Sidmouth's speech, Hansard, vol. xxxv. p. 4.

[2] Hansard, vol. xxxv. p. 173.

time for Lord Cochrane to go to the House, forced him into a chair, and thus they carried him to the hall door with the Bristol Petition in his arms, in a roll of parchment about the size of a tolerable barrel."[1] It was permitted to lie upon the table, "where it still lies," adds Cobbett some time after, "ungranted its prayer, undiscussed its contents, unanswered its allegations."

The House of Commons, the people's House, be it always remembered, did not, however, evince overmuch sympathy with this inrush of Petitions. The Government and its supporters displayed daily their touchiness and irritation at the frequent recurrence in the Petitions of the very undeniable statement that Parliament did not represent the people.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Vansittart) said: "He would leave the House to judge how far these Petitions were to be considered as the genuine and authentic language of the petitioners, or how far they were the dictation of certain factious demagogues, who were now agitating the question of reform throughout the country."[2]

Mr. Lamb (afterwards Lord Melbourne) said: "All those plans for Reform proceeded from mistaken views of the subjects, and from the misrepresentations of the ancient history of our country. In all the resolutions which had been agreed to at recent meetings there was not one truth fairly told, nor any portion of truth introduced which was not dashed or brewed with lies and misrepresentations. . . .

"The Bill (for reform) was to be prepared out of doors, and they were to sit there in order to receive and pass it. That was the popular doctrine now with the reformers."[3]

[1] Cobbett, *Political Register*, 1817, p. 620.

[2] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxv. p. 91.

[3] *Ibid.* p. 88.

Both Houses of Parliament went beyond the expression of their dislike, and freely exercised their right of refusing to receive Petitions; not that it, indeed, mattered whether they received them or not, for no proceedings were taken on those which were received praying for Parliamentary reform, at this time at least.

During the short while before the Select Committees reported, a continual wrangle went on as to receiving the Petitions sent up for presentation. Certain impeding forms were insisted on. The Petitions were to be read first by the member moving their presentation: their moderation of language and proper deference were to be vouched for, and so forth, and so forth; and all this amidst the most frequent protestations that the House was willing to receive the Petitions.

Their protestations were very much like those of some of the petitioners against concession to the Roman Catholics, who began with the declaration: "That the petitioners can never cease to be the firm advocates of religious toleration." [1]

Brougham, though "declaring his opposition to the principle of universal suffrage," and annual Parliaments, nevertheless urged the necessity the House was under of accepting Petitions. He said: "Facility of petitioning formed a natural preventive against violence. It held out to the people an encouragement rather to petition the House in all cases for redress than to resort to illegal or riotous measures. On the score of policy, as well as principle, he was an advocate for facilitating the admission of all Petitions from the people." [2]

And a few days later, referring to the questions of

[1] See the Petition from the University of Oxford, Hansard (1813), vol. xxiv. p. 115.

[2] Hansard (1817), vol. xxxv. p. 84.

universal suffrage and annual Parliaments, he said: "I do not think these delusions will spread far. The people of England have not, in my opinion, exhibited any symptom of participating in them. It is true they have presented hundreds of Petitions to this House. I believe above a million of people have declared to this House some opinion or other on the question of reform. These persons have been collected together at meetings, to which they flocked simply because they felt severe distress. They knew, not from the bad teachers and false prophets who got among them, but from their own experience, and from the nature of their sufferings, that they, in a great measure, originated from the mal-administration of public affairs. So knowing and so feeling they naturally vented their complaints in the Petitions with which the table of this House groans, into which Petitions many statements and propositions have evidently been thrust, to which the actual petitioners themselves were no parties whatever. . . . Severe distress is the real cause of this agitation."[1]

It was also urged with much force by Lord Lacelles[2] that "A wide distinction ought to be made between the designs and disposition of the petitioners and the reprehensible terms to which the House objected.

"The people were in great distress, without employment, or the prospect of returning prosperity. In the extremity of their trouble, they looked about for an alleviation of their sufferings, or a remedy for their grievances; and in this state they were told that by subscribing their names to a Petition for Parliamentary reform, they might obtain a relief from their burdens through political changes, and secure themselves against the recurrence of similar evils. Men in distress were

[1] Hansard (1817), vol. xxxv. p. 366. [2] *Ibid.* p. 159.

"not disposed to examine very scrupulously into the truth or propriety of any measure that held out the hope or prospect of a beneficial change. The petitioners, though they thus subscribed violent Petitions, were not violent men, and ought not to be judged according to the strict import of expressions which many of them did not weigh and some of them did not understand. The intemperate resolutions to which they came at public meetings were no index to the real deliberate and matured opinions of those who voted them by acclamation."

Sir F. Burdett, a Radical member, and therefore capable of speaking with authority on the subject, said: "Nothing had tended more to keep the people in good humour and tranquillity than the public right of addressing the constituted authorities of the country."

A very large number of Petitions, however, were rejected by the House, either on account of some informality, or of some expression contained in them which was regarded as disrespectful to the House.

As was said at the time about the ministerial treatment of the Petitions: "Ministers object to forms; they object to spirit; they object to motives; they object to everything that objects to themselves."

The majority of the House of Commons was clearly in a very bad humour. The whole sting of the meetings, of the Platform, and the Petitions was, that Parliamentary reform should be asked for, for that imperilled so much, to so many members of the House. Reform rankled deep in the minds of many of them. And yet it appears a not unreasonable request when the state of Parliamentary representation was such that, in Scotland, "a man might possess £10,000 a year in property or in land without being entitled to a vote

for a member of Parliament."[1] And that, in a borough in England, "The bellman was sent through the town (Honiton) to order the voters to come to Mr. Townshend's, the head man in the place, and a banker, to receive ten guineas each for their vote"—a fact vouched for on the authority of the member who was thus returned to represent the constituency.[2]

But it was not merely in the open-air meetings, and the framing and discussion of Petitions, that the Platform was at work. It was busy in other less conspicuous places at the same time. Bamford, in his interesting autobiography, gives us a graphic picture of what was going on, not only in one, but in many places; and as such meetings as he describes were also presently to come within the scope of Government legislation, his description is well worth quoting. He wrote:[3] "Several times I attended (in London) meetings of Trades Clubs, and other public assemblages of the working men. They would generally be found in a large room, an elevated seat being placed for the chairman. On first opening the door the place seemed dimmed by a suffocating vapour of tobacco, curling from the cups of long pipes, and issuing from the mouths of the smokers in clouds of abominable odour, like nothing in the world more than one of the unclean fogs of their streets (though the latter were certainly less offensive and probably less hurtful). Every man would have his half-pint of porter before him; many would be speaking at once; and the hum and confusion would be such as gave an idea of there being more talkers than thinkers, more speakers than listeners. Presently 'order' would be called, and

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxv. p. 177.

[2] See Lord Cochrane's Speech (he was the M.P. so returned), Hansard, vol. xxxv. p. 92.

[3] Bamford's *Passages in the Life of a Radical*, vol. i. p. 23.

"comparative silence would ensue—a speaker, stranger, or citizen would be announced, with much courtesy and compliment. 'Hear, hear,' would follow, with clapping of hands, and knocking of knuckles on the tables till the half-pints danced; then a speech, with compliments to some brother orator or popular statesman; next a resolution in favour of Parliamentary reform, and a speech to second it; an amendment on some minor point would follow; a seconding of that, a breach of order by some individual of warm temperament; half a dozen would rise to set him right, a dozen to put them down; and the vociferation and gesticulation would become loud and confounding."

From all these debates, and petitionings, and meetings, open air and otherwise, certain facts stand out with vivid clearness—facts which must have been pregnant with deep meaning to the more clear-sighted statesmen of the time, one at least of whom has placed on record his recognition of them.

The Platform had never yet spread itself so extensively throughout the country, never yet was it so universally adopted by the people as the mouthpiece of their grievances and of their hopes, never yet had it so fully revealed the tremendous power it might become in the government of the country. Ministers decreed accordingly that it was to be struck down.

Place presents us with an interesting view of the policy of the Ministers at this period: "Not sufficiently adverting to the increase of knowledge which had taken place, the Ministers resorted to the old Pitt system of alarms. Attempts were made to frighten the nation. Disaffection, Sedition, Popery, Treason, Rebellion were proclaimed as evils which had proceeded to such an extent that it required all the energy of the Govern-

ment, aided by the loyal portion of the people, effectually to put down for ever the evil designs of the disaffected; but, notwithstanding the advantages the distressed state of the working people gave them, and the nefarious way in which they took advantage of it, they failed in their attempt to excite such an alarm as would have left them at liberty to proceed as they wished. Circumstances had materially changed; the trick which had been played too often with success, and the consequent result in the enormous amount of the debt and taxes, operated as a warning even to the extravagantly loyal part of the people."[1]

Whether they excited sufficient alarm or not, they certainly succeeded in having their own way pretty well.

The Secret Committees reported on the 18th and 19th of February. Their reports cannot but be regarded, by the light shed upon them by subsequent evidence and events, as humiliating to those concerned in them. That of the House of Lords[2] was the more rational of the two. Even it, however, depicted the country as on the verge of revolution.

The meeting at Spa Fields on the 15th of November 1816, which has been already described, was the starting-point of their panic. The Committee reported that they had found such evidence as left no doubt in their mind "that a traitorous conspiracy had been formed in the metropolis for the purpose of overthrowing, by means of a general insurrection, the established Government, laws, and Constitution of this kingdom, and of effecting a general plunder and division of property; . . . and that such designs had not been confined to the capital, but extended widely in many other parts of Great Britain, particularly in some of the most populous

[1] Place, MSS., 27,809, p. 39. [2] See Hansard, 1817, vol. xxxv. p. 411.

"and manufacturing districts." The House of Commons Committee,[1] with melodramatic bombast, declared that the design was, by a sudden rising in the dead of night, to surprise and overpower the soldiers in their different barracks, which were to be set on fire; at the same time to possess themselves of the artillery, to seize or destroy the bridges, and to take possession of the Tower and the Bank. In furtherance of this design, a "machine was projected for clearing the streets of cavalry," in conclusive proof whereof was "a drawing of this machine, fully authenticated," which had been found.

It would be unnecessary to refer to these puerilities, for they can scarcely be regarded as the calm conclusions of intelligent men, were it not for the legislation which was based on them, and which vitally concerned the existence of the Platform.

The Lords' Committee attributed all these treasonable plans and movements to certain Societies or Clubs: "Many of these Societies pass under the denomination of 'Hampden Clubs.' Under this title Societies of very various descriptions appear to have been formed, all professing their object to be Parliamentary reform. . . . But the Committee find that, particularly among the manufacturing and labouring classes, Societies of this denomination have been most widely extended, and appear to have become some of the chief instruments of disseminating doctrines, and of preparing for the execution of plans, the most dangerous to the public security and peace.[2]

"Others of these Societies are called 'Union Clubs,' professing the same object of Parliamentary reform, but

[1] See Hansard, 1817, vol. xxxv. p. 438.

[2] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxv. p. 415.

under these words, understanding universal suffrage and annual Parliaments—projects which evidently involve not any qualified or partial change, but a total subversion of the British Constitution.[1]

"It appears that there is a London Union Society, and branch Unions corresponding with it, and affiliated to it. Others of these Societies have adopted the name of 'Spencean Philanthropists'; and it was by members of a club of this description that the plans of the conspirators in London were discussed and prepared for execution. The principles of these last associations seem to be spreading rapidly among other Societies which have been formed, and are daily forming, under that and other denominations in the country. . . .

"It appears to be an essential part of the system to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by public meetings, convoked either by the leaders of these Societies, or by others, in the metropolis, and in populous places and districts, to address the multitude in terms of unprecedented licence and violence, amounting even in some instances to an open declaration that, in case of non-compliance with their Petitions, the Sovereign will have forfeited his claims to their allegiance. These proceedings are subsequently printed and circulated, and thus become a fresh vehicle for sedition and treason.[2]

"By the frequency of these meetings the minds of his Majesty's well-disposed and peaceable subjects are held in a state of perpetual agitation and alarm."

The Lords Committee ended by saying, that "Such a state of things cannot be suffered to continue without hazarding the most imminent and dreadful evils," and by expressing their "decided opinion" that further provisions were necessary "for the preservation of the

[1] Lords Committee, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxv. p. 416. [2] *Ibid.* p. 418.

"public peace, and for the protection of interests in which the happiness of every class of the community is deeply and equally involved."

The House of Commons Committee declared that the utmost vigilance of the Government under the existing state of the laws had been found inadequate to prevent the evils they had described.

It is difficult adequately to characterise these productions. One member, Mr. Bennett, openly showed his contempt for the report of the House of Commons Committee. Speaking in the House, he said: "The whole people were in this Report libelled and arraigned—they were traduced in their characters, and were to surrender their freedom by such trash as this—trash which I only think fit for trampling under my feet." (Here he threw the Report on the floor of the House and trampled on it.)

If it were not that the Government had a clear and definite object in putting the most alarming aspect on every incident which had occurred, one would only think the members of the Committees had been very easily deceived, and suppose that they had given credence to whatever fanciful imaginings some of the Government spies of the period palmed off on them as true. But when the Government had a distinct object in depicting the country on the verge of insurrection and revolution, when their sole hope of retaining their own power and that of their class depended upon their obtaining extra laws to enable them to check the increasing power of the people and the growing assertion of it from and by the Platform, then one is forced to put a less innocent interpretation on their action, and to conclude that the statements in the Reports were deliberate and designed exaggeration—for it is to be remembered that the great

majority of both Committees consisted of the members of the Government itself or their hangers-on. The very language of the Reports justifies this view of the matter, and if absolute proof is wanted, it is, I think, afforded in the unnecessarily far-reaching and vindictive character of the legislation which was based on these Reports, and for which they were made the justification.

Supported by the recommendations of the Committees, the Government determined to strike down the Platform—that was the source of most of their trouble, the cause of most of their anger.

In 1795 the Platform had been met by two Acts. The emergency of 1817 required four Acts. The Prime Minister declaring that "In 1794 the danger of the country was great; but the danger of the present moment exhibited features of a more desperate and malignant character."[1]

The Act which was passed in 1795 to protect the King from attack was extended to the Prince Regent.[2] An Act against the seduction of soldiers from their allegiance was also deemed necessary,[3] "as it appeared in this, as well as in former treasons, that much hope was built on the hope of debauching and seducing the soldiery and sea forces;" but their real measures of

[1] Hansard, vol. xxxv. p. 573.

[2] 57 Geo. III. cap. 6, 17th March 1817. "An Act to make perpetual certain parts of an Act of the thirty-sixth year (1795) of his present Majesty, for the safety and preservation of his Majesty's person and Government against treasonable and seditious practices and attempts, and for the safety and preservation of the person of his Royal Highness, the Prince Regent, against treasonable practices and attempts."

[3] 57 Geo. III. cap. 7, 17th March 1817. "An Act to revive and make perpetual two Acts of the thirty-seventh year of his present Majesty—the one in the Parliament of Great Britain, and the other in the Parliament of Ireland—for the better prevention and punishment of attempts to seduce persons serving in his Majesty's forces by sea or land from their duty and allegiance to his Majesty or to incite them to mutiny or disobedience."

This is even a more curious instance of legislation by reviving a statute than that already referred to, for in this case one of the Acts revived was an Act of the Irish Parliament.

repression, the real laws which struck down the Platform, were, first, the Act[1] suspending the Habeas Corpus Act, and secondly, an Act[2] practically re-enacting the Act of 1795 against Seditious Meetings, Clubs, and Societies.

The Bill for the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act was introduced in the House of Lords, and quickly passed there. In the House of Commons all resistance to it was ineffectual, the Ministry having an enormous and obedient majority there as well as in the Lords. The composition of part of that majority is well illustrated by the speech of a certain Mr. Hudson Gurney, one of those "virtual representatives" who shed such lustre on the Constitution, that in later years a revolution was risked to save them. He was member for the decayed borough of Newton in the Isle of Wight, which, though it consisted of only a few cottages, was nevertheless a corporation, and had a titular Mayor. There were thirty-three electors, but only one of them resided in the place.

Speaking on the first reading of the Bill in the House of Commons, this illustrious member, whose name should be gibbeted to posterity, thus expressed his views: "His counsel to the Crown would be to revert to the vigorous measures of the days of Elizabeth when counselled by Cecil and Walsingham — to check the officiousness of volunteer advisers—by driving a cleaver through their wrists with a mallet in Palace Yard—and to keep peace in the city by hanging boys for throwing stones at the parish constables."[3]

The Bill passed, and the suspension of the Habeas Corpus came into immediate operation. The preamble of the Act stated that a traitorous con-

[1] 57 Geo. III. cap. 3, 4th March 1817.
[2] 57 Geo. III. cap. 19, 31st March 1817.
[3] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxv. p. 649.

spiracy had been formed for the purpose of overthrowing by means of a general insurrection the established government, laws, and constitution of this kingdom, and that designs and practices of a treasonable and highly dangerous nature were carrying on in the metropolis, and in many other parts of Great Britain; and power was given to the Ministers to arrest practically any one they wished. The suspension was to remain in force until the 1st July 1817.

Tremendous as was the power thus obtained by the Ministers, it was far from satisfying them, and a Bill for the more effectually preventing Seditious Meetings and Assemblies was introduced into the House of Commons by Lord Castlereagh. "In 1795," he said, "the Legislature, by the Seditious Meetings Act, anticipated and prevented evils by stopping them. Now, however, the acts of violence which had only been contemplated then, had in the present case been put into execution.[1]

"A mob was assembled, their basest passions were appealed to, their cupidity inflamed, their most lawless appetites promised to be gratified, the means too were pointed out, and these agitators watched in the countenances of the deluded rabble the effect of their harangues, till they found them wrought up to the perpetration of the most horrid excesses and crimes. All this had actually been done." . . .

Another member of the Government, the Solicitor-General, displayed the panic into which the Platform and public meetings had thrown the Government, and their obedient followers in Parliament. He said: "Of the various means employed by the fomenters of discontent, one of the most efficacious was, to call

[1] Hansard, 1817, vol. xxxv. p. 599.

"together a number of persons, to inflame them by harangues, to persuade them that the evils arising from the circumstances of the times would be remedied by their application to Parliament, and to persuade them that they had a right to force Parliament to comply with their demands. These meetings, which might be turned to every mischievous purpose, the Bill was intended to control."[1]

The measure, proposed and enacted,[2] was in the greater portion of it identical in terms with that of 1795. It enacted that "No meeting of any description of persons, exceeding the number of fifty (except meetings duly convened by the Sheriff, etc.), shall be holden for the purpose or on the pretext of considering of or preparing any petition, complaint, remonstrance, or other address to the King or Parliament for alteration of matters established in the Church or State, or for the purpose or on the pretext of deliberating upon any grievance in Church or State unless notice of the intention to hold such meeting, and of the time and place, when and where the same shall be proposed to be holden, and of the purpose for which the same shall be proposed to be holden," shall be given in the name of seven householders at the least in some public newspaper five days before such meeting, and sent to the Clerk of the Peace, who was directed to send a copy to three local Justices at the least.

The magistrates were "authorised and empowered" to resort to the meeting, and in this Act again there was a provision for safeguarding them to the meeting. All meetings of over fifty persons, regarding which the necessary notice had not been given, were declared to be "unlawful assemblies." No meeting was to be

[1] Hansard, vol. xxxv. p. 850. [2] 57 Geo. III. cap. 19, 31st March 1817.

adjourned, and any adjourned meeting was declared to be an "unlawful assembly."

In either of these cases the meeting might be dispersed by order of a magistrate, and if more than twelve persons remained after the lapse of an hour, then "such continuing together shall be adjudged felony without benefit of clergy, and the offenders shall suffer death, as in cases of felony, without benefit of clergy."

Then, as regarded the meetings which were held in pursuance of the notice, the magistrates were given identically the same powers for stopping the speaker and dispersing the meeting as they had been in 1795, and if there were any obstruction it was lawful for the magistrate by proclamation to order the meeting to disperse, and any persons to the number of twelve or more remaining were liable to arrest, and on conviction to the penalty of death, as in the case of felony, without benefit of clergy.

The proclamation to be used was: "Our Sovereign Lord the King chargeth and commandeth all persons here assembled immediately to disperse themselves, and peaceably to depart to their habitations or to their lawful business upon pain of death. *God save the King!*" And if any one was killed or maimed or wounded in the dispersal of the meeting the magistrate was indemnified. Any obstruction to the orders or proceedings of the magistrates rendered the offender liable to the penalty of death without benefit of clergy.

The Act then proceeded to deal with lecture rooms, etc. (sect. 14): "Whereas divers places have of late been used for delivering lectures or discourses and holding debates, which lectures, discourses, or debates, have in many instances been of a seditious and immoral nature," it was enacted that all such places, a field

included, so as to prevent open-air lectures or debates, at or in which any lecture or discourse shall be publicly delivered, or any public debate shall be had, on any subject whatever, for the purpose of raising money, or to which admission was charged, "shall, unless previously licensed, be deemed to be 'disorderly places.'" Any one who opened a place for such a purpose was liable to a penalty of £100; every one who acted as president or chairman, and any one paying money to attend them, were liable on conviction to a penalty of £20. Magistrates were at liberty to go into such houses or places, licensed or unlicensed, whenever they wished.

These portions of the Act were to continue in force till the 24th July 1818.

This, however, was far from being all.

The Act went on: "And whereas divers Societies or Clubs have been instituted in the metropolis, and in various parts of this kingdom, of a dangerous nature and tendency, inconsistent with the public tranquillity and the existence of the established Government, Laws, and Constitution of the kingdom, and the members of many of such Societies or Clubs have taken unlawful oaths, etc., or assented to illegal tests, and many of the said Societies or Clubs elect, appoint, or employ Committees, delegates, representatives, or missionaries of such Societies or Clubs to meet, confer, or correspond with other Societies or Clubs, or with delegates, representatives, or missionaries of such other Societies, and to induce and persuade other persons to become members thereof, and by such means maintain an influence over large bodies of men, and delude many ignorant and unwary persons into the commission of acts highly criminal . . . and whereas it is expedient and necessary that all such Societies and Clubs, as aforesaid, should be

utterly suppressed and prohibited as unlawful combinations and confederacies, highly dangerous to the peace and tranquillity of this kingdom, and to the constitution of the Government thereof as by law established," certain provisions were enacted to effect this object; any person breaking them was liable on conviction to a penalty of a fine of £20 or three months' imprisonment if convicted before a magistrate, or seven years' transportation if convicted on indictment.

The proposal thus made by Lord Liverpool's Government is the most extraordinary testimony to the astounding spirit of English Toryism, and to their utter ignorance of the changes which twenty years' had effected in the country. In 1795, when a revolutionary panic existed, such a measure had been passed; in 1817, though the ground was trembling under the feet of feudalism and feudalistic ideas, such a measure must be re-enacted. What relentless bloodthirsty vindictiveness must have filled the bosoms of this Tory Government when nothing less than the punishment of death without benefit of clergy was deemed sufficient for persons remaining at a meeting which any ignorant or bigotted magistrate had ordered to disperse! What absolute terror must the Government and its dependents have been in to have dared to make so monstrous, so inhumanly cruel a proposition! It would be hard to believe that such a proposal was made so lately as the second decade of the nineteenth century, were it not that the Seditious Meetings Act of 1817 is there in the Statute Book, proving not alone that the proposal was made but that it was actually enacted.

It was but natural that such a proposal should have been vehemently opposed by the Liberal portion of Parliament.

The first point seized on was the dissimilarity of circumstances between 1795 and 1817. In 1795 England was at war with France, was in expectation of being invaded, revolutionary principles existed to an extent sufficient to alarm large sections of the people; visionary theories of Government prevailed in the minds of some of the multitude; a Society was in actual correspondence with, and was said to be receiving money from the enemy; and, above all, the determination of some of the discontented was to seek relief by other means than petitioning Parliament. In 1817, so far from any one thinking of foreign help, the people had shown themselves only anxious to petition Parliament for relief and redress; never had the tables of the two Houses been so loaded with Petitions from all parts of the kingdom, from every description of its inhabitants, from numbers infinitely exceeding those that ever before approached Parliament in the language of complaint. Meetings had been held in every part of the country, and nowhere had there been any disturbance at a meeting, or even resulting from it, except in the solitary instance of the metropolis.

Distress was deep and widespread, without parallel in any former period of the country's history, and no other country could exhibit a population suffering under such accumulated distresses, where so much forbearance was shown, and such good temper was manifested. And the taunt was flung at the Government, that the chief cause of the Bill for suppressing meetings was the number of Petitions which the people were sending to the House asking for reform, and that they complained so much, that the Government were resolved to stifle their voice.

In vain was it urged that meetings of the people

were one of the important parts of the Constitution, and that it was impossible to restrain the expression of public opinion without diminishing that attachment to the Constitution which was one of the noblest characteristics of the people. Canning attempted to justify the Bill, with the specious reasoning that it was necessary to fence round the invaluable right of petitioning, and to secure the people in its full enjoyment—a rather curious argument when nearly 500 Petitions for reform, signed by nearly 1,000,000 of persons, were rejected by the House of Commons because they were printed, or in some other way technically informal.[1] He also declared "that public meetings required extraordinary control, because there was an unusual degree of inflammability in the public mind, and that there were incendiaries abroad who would avail themselves of it to kindle the fires of rebellion in every corner of the kingdom;"[2] and he said: "It is not against legitimate petitions that we are providing; it is not against the peaceable promulgation of opinions, however absurd; but we call on the country to array itself against that physical force by which these mischievous delusions are to be propagated, and maintained. The language is the language of supplication, but the attitude is the attitude of menace."

This was the declared object of the Government, and to attain it they proposed the most sweeping repressive measures, in spite of the fact that the Secret Committee of the House of Commons, extreme as was its composition, felt constrained to admit that "Few if any of the higher orders, or even of the middle class of

[1] "On the 12th March 1817 the number of Petitions for Parliamentary reform which had been presented and were lying on the floor of the House of Commons was 514. The number of signatures was said to be a million and a half."—Place, MSS., 27,809, p. 91.

[2] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxv. p. 1118.

"society, and scarcely any of the agricultural population have lent themselves to the more violent of these projects." [1]

Out of the hundreds of public meetings that had been held, one solitary one had resulted in, or been used as a cloak for riot. This, however, for the Government was sufficient, and they seized on it as the excuse and justification for what they really desired—a general suppression of freedom of speech. Further support to their view was given by the fact that designing men, more eager for self-advertisement than for the real welfare of the people, came to the front, availing themselves of the opportunities afforded for gaining notoriety to stir up violent feelings.

Bamford's autobiography affords us a glimpse behind the scenes, explaining how these men came to the front. "It was about this time (March 1817) that the first out-of-door meeting was held at Rochdale.[2] The day was cold and very wet; the hustings were fixed on the bare moor of Cronkeyshaw. None of the speakers save myself kept their appointment. Nothing in the form of resolution or petition had been prepared; and I had to select and arrange these from an old Statesman newspaper which I found at the rendezvous—'The Rose,' in Yorkshire Street. The town wore an appearance of alarm, and a company or two of soldiers were under arms in the main street. The meeting was however well attended, and the hearts of the people seemed to warm in proportion to the merciless cold of the wind and rain, which latter teemed upon us during the whole of the proceedings. . . .

"On this occasion I received pay for my attendance. On our return to 'The Rose,' besides refreshments, the

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxv. p. 447. [2] Bamford, vol. i. p. 35.

Committee presented me with four shillings, and I accepted the money because I thought I was entitled to it, having lost work to that value at home. But I never, except on this occasion, took money, or any other remuneration, for attending reform meetings. I considered it a mean thing, though the practice was coming much into use, and several of my friends without any scruple continued to do so until 'their occupation' was gone. It was a bad practice, however, and gave rise to a set of orators who made a trade of speechifying, and the race has not become extinct. These persons began to seek engagements of the kind; some would even thrust themselves on public meetings, and then present themselves to the Committees for remuneration, and generally received it. He who produced the greatest excitement, the loudest cheering, and the most violent clappings, was the best orator, and was sure to be engaged, and well paid; and in order to produce those manifestations, the wildest and most extravagant rhodomontade would too often suffice. Such speakers quickly got a name; the calls on them were frequent; and they left their work or their business for a more profitable and flattering employment; tramping from place to place, hawking their new fangles, and guzzling, fattening, and replenishing themselves, at the expense of the simple and credulous multitudes.

"Steadiness of conduct and consistency of principle were soon placed, as it were, at a distance from us; our unity of action was relaxed; new speakers sprung like mushrooms about our feet; plans were broached quite different from any that had been recognised by the Hampden Clubs; and the people, at a loss to distinguish friends from enemies, were soon prepared for the operations of informers, who, in the natural career of their

"business, became also promoters of secret plots, and criminal measures of various descriptions."

It might be thought that the ordinary law, stringent enough in those times, and easily enough set in motion, could have been enforced against such men and such proceedings. The Government thought differently, and so the Habeas Corpus Act was to be suspended, and not alone public meetings, but verbal public discussion to be suppressed. The blow nominally directed against "physical force" was aimed intentionally and deliberately at the Platform, at all forms of public meeting and public speech, except what was palatable to the Government and its dependents. The two Bills were hurried so rapidly through both Houses that there was not much time for agitation out of doors against them. Westminster held a meeting and petitioned against them.[1]

"On every former occasion when the Habeas Corpus Act was suspended," said the petitioners, "the country was involved in war; in some instances to defend the legal succession to the Crown, and in others, as was then alleged, to prevent the overthrow of the Constitution through the assistance of foreign enemies; that at present none of these reasons exist, nor are the petitioners aware of any acts of atrocity having been committed which the law, as it at present stands, cannot reach."

London city likewise met and petitioned; also Nottingham and Bath; but by the 4th of March the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act had passed, and then it became perilous to hold meetings or speak on any subject distasteful to the Government.

One meeting must, however, be specially referred to here, known in history as the Blanket Meeting.

[1] Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 1817, vol. xxxv. p. 643.

The Secret Committee of the House of Lords give full details of the preliminaries to it. They said: "At a meeting which was convened at Manchester on the 3d March (1817), for the purpose of petitioning against the Habeas Corpus Suspension Act, and where several thousand persons appear to have been assembled, it was proposed and agreed to that another meeting should be held on the 10th, with the professed intention that ten out of every twenty persons who should attend it should proceed to London with a Petition to his Royal Highness the Prince Regent. The interval was employed in almost daily meetings of the disaffected, which were numerously attended. The real intentions of the leaders were there developed to their followers in speeches of the most undisguised violence. One of them avowed that he was a republican and a leveller, and would never give up the cause till a republican form of government was established. The people were told by others that if their Petition was rejected they must force it; that the large towns in Yorkshire were adopting the same plan, and would meet them on the road; . . . that there was reason to believe that the Scotch were then on their march; . . . that it would be impossible for the army or anything to resist them. These speakers appear in a few instances to have been checked by some of their associates, but their sentiments were, for the most part, received with strong marks of applause and concurrence."[1]

The meeting was held on the 10th of March at Manchester. In their ignorance and despair many of the people had caught at the idea as offering some hope, and from 4000 to 12,000 persons assembled at St. Peter's Field. "The assemblage consisted almost

[1] Lords Report of Committee, 1817, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxvi. p. 951.

"entirely of operatives. . . . Many of the individuals were observed to have blankets (for the purpose of sleeping on the ground), rugs, or large coats, rolled up and tied knapsack-like on their backs; some had papers, supposed to be Petitions rolled up; and some had stout walking-sticks. The magistrates came upon the field and read the Riot Act, and the meeting was afterwards dispersed by the military and special constables, and twenty-nine persons were apprehended. . . . On the Riot Act being read about 300 persons left the meeting to commence their march to London."[1] It was of course a contemptible fiasco. "About 180 reached Macclesfield," where the first night was spent; "about a score arrived at Leek, and six only were known to pass Ashbourne Bridge. And so ended the Blanket expedition!"

A proceeding such as this strengthened the hands of the Government in their demand for repressive legislation; not that outside events affected them much one way or the other, for with a mechanical and sympathetic majority in the House of Commons any measures proposed by the Government were bound to pass. The repressive measures now proposed promptly became law, and once more the Platform was struck down to the earth.

Again, in 1817, as in 1795, it was asserted by the defenders of the Bill that the measure would not interfere with the presentation of Petitions; yet, as if to show how little value was to be attached to such assertions, Lord Castlereagh audaciously boasted that the measure of 1795 had been "the means of preventing the exercise of the right of Petition; it had prevented that right from being made the indirect means of

[1] Bamford, vol. i. p. 32.

corrupting the public mind, and not merely corrupting, but leading it on to the perpetration of every atrocity, high treason, felony, and rebellion."[1]

It is certain, at any rate, that the measure of 1817 did interfere with the presentation of Petitions, for, after the passing of the Act, there was an absolute and complete cessation both of public meetings and Petitions, and no Petitions were presented to Parliament except one from Birmingham, and that one not from a public meeting.

As Cobbett remarked in his *Register*, after explaining the provisions of the Act, "This being the law, I leave you to guess whether any meetings will be held again except those which are called by persons in *authority*, and what sort of meetings those are you know well enough."

Indeed, while the Bill was still under discussion, a foretaste of what would come when it was passed was given at Liverpool, where the Mayor refused to convene a meeting to petition Parliament for reform, and endeavoured to prevent that communication of the people to Parliament which it was as much the interest of the House as of the people to keep open.

The meeting had been nevertheless held, and showed how unjustifiable was the action of the Mayor, for the Petition was signed by 14,000 people,—Lord Sefton, who presented it, attesting to their respectability: "Never yet was a Petition more respectably signed."

In one matter only was this Act less stringent than its prototype of 1795; it was to continue in force for a shorter period—only, in fact, until the 24th of July 1818; but, on the other hand, on this occasion it was supplemented by the suspension of the Habeas Corpus

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxv. p. 599.

Act—a tremendous weapon against any movement on the part of the Platform, any loophole of escape through the meshes of one Act being effectually stopped by the other.

The effect of the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act was described by Bamford: "Personal liberty not being now secure from one hour to another, many of the leading reformers were induced to quit their homes, and seek concealment where they could obtain it. Open meetings being suspended, secret ones ensued."[1]

A Committee of the House of Lords, which was appointed some time after this, has also described the effect of this legislation: "During part of the month of April (1817) an intermission appears indeed to have taken place generally, at least of the more open proceedings.[2] Public meetings in large bodies could no longer be convened, except under the regulations of the recent Act of Parliament. Numerous meetings of Societies have been less frequently held in public-houses. In some districts clubs have been dissolved; in others their meetings have been suspended, or have been held in private houses, or in places remote from observation. The necessity of greater caution has been felt and inculcated; communications by writing have been discountenanced; the concealment of the names of leading persons has been recommended; and it has been thought better that a few persons only should be entrusted with their plans, and should give notice to the different delegates to have their partisans in readiness to act when required and as directed. These delegates appointed from various places have met in small numbers, and thus kept up a general but verbal correspondence among the disaffected."

[1] Bamford, vol. i. p. 42. [2] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxvi. p. 954.

Not content with legislating against the rights of public meeting and Petitioning, the Government made a deliberate attempt, in another way, to interfere with, and, if possible, crush out the last vestiges of freedom of speech. Scotland was selected as the scene of the experiment, probably an example there being deemed desirable.

A meeting had been held at Kilmarnock on the 7th December 1816, at which resolutions had been passed, and a Petition adopted to the Regent and both Houses of Parliament, upon the distressed state of the country, and the subject of Parliamentary reform.[1]

Alexander M'Laren, a half-starved weaver, who worked fifteen hours a day for the miserable wages of five shillings a week, spoke at the meeting. He was indicted for sedition in that he did at that public "meeting, which was attended by a great multitude of persons, chiefly of the lower orders, wickedly and feloniously deliver a speech containing a number of seditious and inflammatory remarks and assertions, calculated to degrade and bring into contempt the Government and Legislature, and to withdraw therefrom the confidence and affections of the people, and to fill the realm with trouble and dissension."

A man named Baird was indicted at the same time for printing this speech.

The "wicked and seditious" words charged against M'Laren were: "That our sufferings are insupportable is demonstrated to the world; and that they are neither temporary nor occasioned by a transition from war to peace is palpable to all, though all have not the courage to avow it. The fact is, we are ruled by men only solicitous for their own aggrandisement; and they care

[1] For a full account of this trial, which took place in March 1817, see *State Trials*, vol. xxxiii. p. 1, *et seq.*

"no further for the great body of the people than (as) they are subservient to their accursed purposes. If you are convinced of this, my countrymen, I would therefore put the question—Are you degenerate enough to bear it? Shall we, whose forefathers set limits to the all-grasping power of Rome?—shall we, whose forefathers, at the never-to-be-forgotten field of Bannockburn, told the mighty Edward, at the head of the most mighty army that ever trod on Britain's soil, 'Hitherto shalt thou come, and no further'?—shall we, I say, whose forefathers defied the efforts of foreign tyranny to enslave our beloved country, meanly permit, in our day, without a murmur, a base oligarchy to feed their filthy vermin on our vitals, and rule us as they will? No, my countrymen. Let us lay our Petitions at the foot of the throne, where sits our august Prince, whose gracious nature will incline his ear to listen to the cries of his people, which he is bound to do by the laws of his country. But should he be so infatuated as to turn a deaf ear to their just Petition, he has forfeited their allegiance. Yes, my fellow-townsmen, in such a case, to hell with our allegiance."[1]

The Lord Advocate, who prosecuted him, contended that "Any speech or writing calculated and intended to vilify the House of Commons, stating, for instance, that it is not the House of Commons, that it is the mere nominal and pretended representative of the people, and does not represent them, that it has become corrupt, falls under the crime of sedition."

Mr. Clerk, who defended M'Laren, made a most powerful speech: "If the right of petitioning belongs to the people, they must of necessity have the right of deliberation upon the subject of their Petitions, to consult

[1] Lord Cockburn says this last sentence was "clearly sedition."

with each other at public meetings, to be advised by those who are able to advise them, or think themselves able, upon the various points which may occur in considering what are grievances, and what are the remedies to be proposed. . . . And generally, whatever the grievance or fancied grievance is, it may lawfully be the subject of a Petition to the Legislature, and for the same reason it may lawfully be the subject of deliberation and discussion, even in public meetings held for the purpose of petitioning. . . . There can be no limits to this right of petitioning, and previously deliberating, for when it is limited, the right is gone. The right is to present unreasonable as well as reasonable Petitions. Or if unreasonable Petitions were unlawful, the Legislature alone is the judge of what is reasonable or unreasonable in Petitions. If the right of petitioning could be restrained by the courts of law, there would be an end to the right of petitioning—a fundamental law of this monarchy, a law, the palladium of our other rights. . . . It has been reserved for the present Lord Advocate to bring such a case as the present to trial, in which, if the verdict find the persons guilty of sedition, the right of petitioning, hitherto unchallenged, seems to be attacked almost in direct terms. Is the right of petitioning then to be interrupted in this extraordinary manner by bringing the Petitions into the Court of Justiciary? The sacred right of petitioning is the bulwark of the right of free discussion."

Jeffrey, in his defence of Baird for selling reports of the meetings, also made an excellent speech. He declared "that a great part of the evils arose from a defect in one of the great bodies of the Legislature, from want of due communion of sentiment between the body of the people, and those whose function it is to express their sentiments and watch over their interests.

"There is a dissension known to this country, and known to all free countries, and to them only, which, however terrible it may appear to the sons of habitual slavery, or the minions of arbitrary power, or the contented and envied possessors of present influence, is of that wholesome nature that on it the life and health of the Constitution ultimately depend. It is not a frightful commotion, but a healthful exercise, not an exhausting fever, but a natural movement proceeding from the vigour of the Constitution, and at once indicating and maintaining that vigour unimpaired. In a free country, where the principles of Government are well understood, and the laws well administered, parties will ever be found opposed to parties. . . . This dissension is the life and heart and spirit of our Constitution; and true policy should promote discussion on those great points on which discussion must always be keen, and, in some degree, stormy and violent, because it is on them that the liberty, the prosperity, and happiness of the nation depend, and to them that all men of spirit, ingenuity, and talents have devoted their whole lives. . . . If this dissension were prevented, liberty would be extinguished. That very hostility which appears to excite so much apprehension is the parent of public prosperity, and of all the advantages in a free state for which it is worth while to contend." Though the Petition was received by Parliament, both the prisoners were convicted; but being men of exemplary character, the Jury recommended them to mercy, and they escaped with a sentence of six months' imprisonment each, and then to find bail.

The subject which had driven the Government into this wild panic, and led to such repressive legislation, was brought before the House of Commons on the 20th

of May by Sir F. Burdett, who moved for a Select Committee "to take into consideration the state of the representatives of the people in Parliament."[1] More Petitions, he asserted, had been presented on this subject than on any other occasion whatever, for there were Petitions from every part of the country bearing not less than a million of signatures. "The House of Commons has lost its former connection with the people; they no longer regard themselves as their stewards or servants, but as a master uniting in himself all the different springs and species of authority."[2]

Brand, who seconded the motion, spoke of the unprecedented energy with which the people had petitioned for reform: "There had been at no former period so great and decided an expression on the part of the public in favour of a Parliamentary reform."

William Lamb—afterwards to be Lord Melbourne and Liberal Prime Minister — was not prepared to attach much weight to this expression of opinion.

He said: "When I consider the manner in which these Petitions have been prepared and procured, the pilgrimages which have been undertaken for the purpose of promoting them; above all, when I recollect the speeches which at public meetings have preceded and recommended them, the gross misrepresentations, the delusive promises, the wild hopes, and the excessive exaggerations, under the influence of which they have been voted, I cannot consent to consider them as expressing in any degree the cool, deliberate, well-understood sense of the people of England."[3]

In a later speech (27th June 1817) he said: "What had been stated at those meetings respecting Parlia-

[1] Hansard, vol. xxxvi. p. 705.
[2] *Ibid.* p. 728.
[3] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxvi. p. 790.

"mentary reform, and the declarations that they were to resort to physical force if their Petitions were rejected, indicated a most dangerous spirit. In fact, the Petitions which had been presented to that House were not Petitions for reform, but for revolution, since they prayed for Annual Parliaments and Universal Suffrage."[1]

One of the illustrious "virtual representatives" also took occasion to express his feelings on the subject.

"I declare," said the Honourable J. Ward, member for the rotten and corrupt borough of Ivelchester, with some sixty electors purchasable by the highest bidder,—"I declare that a motion for reform in Parliament produces upon my mind the same effect as a motion for a democracy—a motion for a revolution."[2]

Seventy-seven members voted for Sir Francis Burdett's proposal. The Government phalanx against it numbered 265.

One more measure for the repression of the Platform was to be adopted by the Government before the session came to an end. The suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act was to expire on the 1st July. Before that date was reached—namely, on the 3d June—a message came from the Regent with more papers in a sealed bag, and again in both Houses Secret Committees were appointed.

The House of Lords Committee reported on the 12th June. In their report is to be seen the same deliberate effort to excite panic, and to exaggerate and make the most of any foolish acts of a few rash or ignorant men, if not actually to invent alarms.

Manchester this time was said to have been the intended scene of an insurrection. The Lords Committee betrayed the real object of their hostility by

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxvi. p. 1226. [2] *Ibid.* p. 758.

making a deliberate attempt to connect the cause of Parliamentary reform in Parliament with the acts of the most extreme men outside. "It was," they said, "about this time (May) that the period for another general rising *appears* to have been fixed for as early a day as possible after the discussion of an expected motion for reform in Parliament." [1]

As if to give colour to this statement, almost the very day that this Report was presented to the House of Lords came news of a "rising" in Derbyshire. The House of Commons Committee, which reported a few days after the Lords Committee, were able to refer to it. "In some populous villages in Derbyshire a more open insurrection took place on the 9th June. . . . It began with attacks upon houses, for the purpose of procuring arms, in one of which a servant was wantonly shot. About 200 insurgents were soon assembled, mostly armed either with pikes or with firearms, and began their march towards Nottingham, in expectation of increasing their numbers as they went, and of finding that place in full insurrection. . . . They were, however, intercepted by detachments of cavalry, which came up with them in different directions, and totally dispersed them." [2]

Foolish and criminal as was this outbreak its cause could be easily traced to its actual source. It was not the Platform that was responsible for it. Place plainly puts the responsibility on other shoulders. He says: "Attempts had been made by means of spies to get up treasonable conspiracies in the north of England, but as long as petitioning the Houses of Parliament was thought useful, none, not even the meanest and

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxvi. p. 954.

[2] *Ibid.* p. 1095, House of Commons Report.

"most ignorant of the people, could be trepanned into acts of treason.[1]

"But when the Habeas Corpus Act was suspended . . . they were able to seduce a few miserable men to attempt an insurrection, and having found a man of resolute and desperate character, reduced to the state of a parish pauper, they placed him at the head under the denomination of 'the Nottingham captain' (Brandreth)."[2]

But lest his statement should be regarded as prejudiced, a passage from the Report of the House of Lords Committee may be quoted, which goes far to admit the truth of Place's assertion.

After saying that the intelligence they received rested "in many of its parts" upon the reports of persons "who have apparently engaged in these criminal transactions with the view of obtaining information, and imparting it" to the authorities, the Committee said: "Your Committee have seen reason to apprehend that the language and conduct of some of these may, in some instances, have had the effect of encouraging those designs which it was intended they should only be the instruments of detecting."[3]

The House of Commons Committee reported on the 20th of June. Both Committees declared that it would not yet be safe to rely for the preservation of public tranquillity upon the ordinary power of the law. And yet the Lords Committee expressed "the fullest confidence in the general loyalty and good disposition, not only of those portions of the kingdom which have hitherto remained in a great degree untainted, but of by far the most considerable part of those very districts

[1] Place, MSS., 27,809, p. 83.

[2] For this riot 35 men were arraigned —3 of whom were hanged and decapitated, 11 transported for life, 4 for fourteen years.

[3] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxvi. p. 950, 1817.

which are the chief scenes of the operations of the disaffected—a confidence which very recent experience has satisfactorily confirmed."

The Commons Committee said: "In the late insurrection on the borders of Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire the mass of the population, through which the insurgents passed, evinced the utmost abhorrence of their designs and projects. In other instances, where the inhabitants have been called on to aid the civil power, that call has been answered with alacrity and zeal."

And yet the Reports of the Committees resulted in the application by Ministers to Parliament for the continuance of the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act. It is interesting getting any information we can as to the manner in which the Government had exercised the powers conferred on them by the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act. From a Return presented to the House of Commons on the 19th June it would appear that on that date there were thirty-two persons in custody, the youngest of whom was eighteen years of age, and the oldest seventy-three; but the Return is defective, in that it does not give the total number of persons who had been arrested under the Act, and a stray remark in the House of Commons leaves one to infer that several other persons had been in custody but had been released.[1]

It is useless referring to the debates that ensued on the proposal of the Government for their being re-entrusted with this power. They were but repetitions of

[1] See a Return, printed by order of the House of Commons, "of the number of persons now in confinement in Great Britain, by Warrant of either of the Secretaries of State, or of six Privy Councillors—detained under the provisions of an Act, passed in the present Session of Parliament, for enabling His Majesty to secure and detain such persons as His Majesty shall suspect are conspiring against His Person and Government—with their ages, and the places of their confinement."—*Parliamentary Papers*, 1817.

their former statements and asseverations. Lord Grey stated the unanswerable reasons when he said that if mischievous men took advantage of the existing distress to encourage irritation, and used the opportunity afforded by the meetings in favour of reform to preach revolutionary doctrines, the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act was not the proper remedy for the discontents that prevailed. Nor was it either politic or just, because there were a few designing persons ready to take advantage of the distressed, to urge them to acts of violence, that the whole people of England were to be deprived of their liberties, and those discontents aggravated which a wise Government would endeavour to remove.

No reasons, no argument, however, availed against the Government, though all reason and all argument was against them. The suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act was continued until the 1st March 1818, and Parliament having done sufficient for one session was prorogued.[1]

Once more then was the Platform struck down and silenced for the time, as effectually as it had been by Pitt in 1795.

No public meetings were to be held except with the sanction of the local authorities; no Platform speech was to be delivered except subject to the approval of the most stupid or bigotted magistrate who chose to be present; any speech not pleasing to the Government rendered the speaker liable to an *ex-officio* information for libel, if not to an indictment for sedition, or high treason; and if all else failed, the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act enabled the Ministers to arrest and imprison any one they chose to suspect of treason.

[1] 57 Geo. III. cap. 55, 30th June 1817.

It is curious, indeed, how all the circumstances of the suppression of the Platform in 1817 were so close a repetition of its suppression in 1795; but most curious of all is the fact that in this latter period, when England was not engaged in a great war for her very existence as in 1795, but was at absolute peace with the whole world, and when the public mind was not in the state of fevered panic which ensued from the terrors and horrors of the French Revolution, the Government should have demanded more wholesale measures of repression than even Pitt demanded and took in 1795.

In 1817 Government demanded and got the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, and the Act against public meetings. In 1795 Pitt was content to rely alone upon the latter; for the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act had expired before he introduced the Bill against Seditious Meetings. It is true that in 1801 he had to obtain from Parliament both those measures, but it was only for a very short period; and in his hands the administration of the Acts was infinitely less tyrannical and despotic than it was in the hands of Lord Liverpool, Lord Sidmouth, and Lord Castlereagh. The truth was, that the Government of 1817 felt their power and the power of their class falling away from them—felt the whole order of things as they loved it beginning to move and shake under their feet. Nothing except the fact that the Parliament of 1817 was practically the same body as that of 1795, nominated by boroughmongers, filled with placemen, and corrupt to its very core, could have enabled the Government to have carried such atrocious proposals, for if Parliament had not changed, the country had. In the interval between 1795 and 1817 great changes had come over the people; their numbers had increased; their power multiplied

enormously; they had become more resolute and determined to obtain their proper share in the Government of the country; less disposed to submit to a system of Government which they believed to be, and which was, unjust. The Government thought to silence opposition by prohibiting public meetings, and the public discussion of grievances; thought to affright people with the penalty of death for not leaving a meeting on the order of a magistrate; but the Government dared not put its own infamous law into operation; and so far as I am aware no trace is to be found in the legal records of the country of any execution, or of any sentence of death, or even of any trial on the capital charge under this section of the Act. That the Government, however, calmly and deliberately proposed these wholesale measures against freedom of speech, and that Parliament sanctioned and approved them by large majorities, are facts which show with what bitter rage the growth of the Platform was regarded by the governing party of that time; for that the Platform had grown, and was growing, must have been evident enough even to them. It was no longer weakly struggling into existence. It was already a power in the land; it had become part and parcel of the public life of the people; it was as indispensable to their political existence as food was to their physical existence, and it had made itself offensive to the governing classes and authorities. Once more then the Government struck hard — harder, in fact, than ever before, and silenced it; they were still able to do this, but though for a time they might succeed in suppressing or checking the Platform, the periods in which the Platform would submit to suppression, indeed to anything but absolute freedom, were becoming shorter and shorter.

CHAPTER X

THE PLATFORM AT THE GENERAL ELECTION OF 1818

THE year 1818 opened under somewhat brighter circumstances for the country than could have been anticipated some six or eight months earlier.

In the course of the autumn of 1817 the prices of provisions had fallen, the demand for labour had increased, agriculture, trade, and manufacturing industry had improved; and when Parliament met at the end of January 1818, the situation was deemed, even by the Government, no longer to require the continuance of the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act. The Government, therefore, instead of waiting until the 1st of March, when the suspension would have expired, magnanimously applied to Parliament for its immediate repeal. Lord Castlereagh declaring that "the prosperity of our commerce, and the vigilance of the magistracy had put an end to the great mass of danger."[1] No information is available as to the actual number of persons who had been arrested under it. The number in custody in June 1817 has been given, but that being only for the number on a particular date was manifestly only a partial record. Place says, though upon what authority I know not, that up to the autumn of 1817,

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxvii. p. 163.

96 persons were seized and confined on charges of treason in England, and 37 in Scotland, or a total of 133, but many arrests may have been made after that date, so his information is also incomplete.[1]

The Government, though abandoning the power a fortnight earlier than they need have done, asked, however, for an Act for "indemnifying" persons who, since the 26th of January 1817, had acted in apprehending, imprisoning, or detaining in custody persons suspected of high treason or treasonable practices, and in the suppression of tumultuous and unlawful assemblies. And Parliament was called on to pass a Bill to this effect "in justice to his Majesty's Ministers, and to the Magistrates who had acted upon the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act in the disturbed districts."

The Bill, of course, promptly became law.[2] The preamble recited that a traitorous conspiracy had been formed in Great Britain to overthrow the Government by means of a general insurrection, and that it had been deemed necessary to imprison, and detain several persons suspected of high treason, to search their houses, and to seize their papers, etc., and that it was necessary to protect the informers against such persons.

"And whereas some of the said Acts done may not have been strictly justifiable in law, but being done for the preservation of the public peace and safety, it is fit that the persons doing the same should be saved harmless in respect thereof," it was enacted that all actions and proceedings on account of anything done in apprehending and imprisoning persons charged with high treason, treasonable practices, etc., should be void,

[1] Place, MSS., 27,809, p. 86.

[2] See Act 58 Geo. III. cap. 6 (17th March 1818).

and the persons against whom such actions were brought should be indemnified for any acts done by them.

The Bill was truly described by Sir S. Romilly "as a Bill to take away all legal remedies from those who had suffered an illegal and arbitrary exercise of authority."

"With the restoration of the Habeas Corpus Act," wrote Bamford, from Manchester, the then centre of agitation, "the agitation for reform was renewed"; but the Seditious Meetings Act being in force, it was renewed only on a very small scale, and in a very tentative way. Several hundred petitions for Parliamentary reform were presented from Bristol, Leeds, Newcastle-on-Tyne, and other places, all signed by only twenty persons, and there had been no preliminary meeting, people evidently being under the impression that under the altered state of the law no Petition should be signed by more than twenty persons.

Westminster, which was the centre of liberalism or radicalism, and where the officials were of the same way of thinking as the people, was able to hold a meeting in favour of Parliamentary reform despite the provisions of the Seditious Meetings Act. It was held on the 28th March; and in the next month a Petition for reform, purporting to be from several thousands of persons assembled at Royton in Lancashire, was presented to the House of Commons, but was rejected —all which must be taken as showing that Parliamentary reform and not revolution was really what was uppermost in men's minds.

It was unfortunate for a Government so anxious to suppress public meetings as the one which had passed the Seditious Meetings Act, that a general election should have become necessary, and incitement be again given to popular assemblies, and occasion for the Plat-

form. No Government had ever yet dared to go the length of attempting to interfere with meetings for the purposes of the election of members of Parliament; and even this Government had inserted a proviso in the Seditious Meetings Act of 1817, stating "That nothing therein contained should by any construction whatever be deemed or taken to apply to or affect any meeting convened, called, or holden for the election of Members of Parliament, or any persons attending such meeting."

The Act, so far at least as meetings were concerned, was to expire on the 24th July 1818; but before that date had been reached—namely, on the 10th of June—Parliament was dissolved, and during the rest of that month, and during the greater part of July, the country was plunged in the turmoil of a general election.

Advantage may be taken of the event as affording material for enabling us to form an idea of what part the Platform took in a general election before Parliament was reformed, and also to draw a most instructive comparison between its scope and power at that period and the present. Fortunately, we have a comprehensive account of the proceedings of the Platform at this election in a work published immediately after by an anonymous author, called "The Late Elections: an Impartial Statement of all Proceedings connected with the Progress and Result of the Late Elections."[1]

The main points of interest, so far as the Platform is concerned, are three—namely, how far did Ministers at this period of our history use the Platform at election time for putting a definite policy before the nation for decision, and for gaining adherents to themselves; next, how far did candidates for Parliamentary position use it as a means of securing votes; and lastly, how far did

[1] Published in London, 1818.

the electors use it for exercising a control over the representatives and exacting pledges from them?

As regards the first of these points, it may be stated at once that on this occasion Ministers themselves issued no manifesto to the country from or by the Platform. They appear rather to have put forward their claims for a renewal of confidence in the Regent's speech which prorogued Parliament immediately before its dissolution. The Prince Regent was made to say[1] (10th June 1818): "On closing this Session, I think it proper to inform you that it is my intention forthwith to dissolve the present, and to give direction for calling a new Parliament. In making this communication, I cannot refrain from adverting to the important change which has occurred in the situation of this country, and of Europe, since I first met you in this place." He then drew a strongly-coloured contrast between England's position at the time when Napoleon was at the height of his power, and her position and possessions in 1818; and he went on: "By the unexampled exertions which you enabled me to make . . . I had the happiness, by the blessing of Divine Providence, to terminate, in conjunction with His Majesty's allies, the most eventful and sanguinary contest in which Europe had for centuries been engaged, with unparalleled success and glory."

This evidently was the ground on which the Government expected to get the approval of the electorate. Lord Liverpool, the Prime Minister, who was in the House of Lords, never set foot on the Platform before the election, or endeavoured in any other public way than through the Regent's speech, to put any issue before the country. Nor did any of the individual Ministers before the election trouble themselves to use the Plat-

[1] Hansard, vol. xxxviii. p. 1315.

form for the purpose of gaining adherents to their general policy or of swaying the electorate. Such an idea never appears to have entered their head as either necessary, useful, or desirable; in fact, all their ideas were in the opposite direction.

Lord Liverpool's cabinet in 1818 consisted of fourteen members, eight of whom were peers. The six commoners were Lord Castlereagh, Foreign Secretary; Vansittart, Chancellor of the Exchequer; Canning, President of the Board of Control; Bathurst, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster; Pole, Master of the Mint; and F. J. Robinson, President of the Board of Trade. Two of these six—namely, Vansittart and Bathurst—sat for the borough of Harwich, which had always been a Treasury borough. The number of voters was 32, and every one of the 32 was under the direct control of the Treasury, and simply did as they were told. There was no contest here. A public dinner was held in the evening after the election, which one of the Ministers "favoured with his presence," but his speech, if one was made, was not considered worth repeating in print to the outer world. F. J. Robinson was returned for Ripon. Here there were 146 electors, but most of them "were the property of" a Miss Lawrence, who, to judge by the result, thought that Mr. Robinson was the fittest person on whom her favour could be bestowed. Platforming here was therefore quite superfluous. Pole was returned for the Queen's County in Ireland after a contest; but in those times the Queen's County was a very remote place, and its electoral doings, or rather the speeches at election time, were of little, I might say, no interest to the British public. Lord Castlereagh, the Foreign Secretary, was returned for the county of Down, also at that time

remote from the centre of political life and influence. A contest here was altogether out of the question, as is evident from the description which Oldfield has given of the state of the electorate in that county. He wrote: "It contains 30,000 freeholders, who elect the friends of the Marquis of Downshire without a contest. To ensure this object, the Marquis's estate has been divided, subdivided, and again divided, until it has become a *warren* of freeholders, and the scheme has completely succeeded."[1] But if no contest was necessary, Lord Castlereagh did not object to use the Platform for a speech on the occasion, though the date on which it was made could scarcely have influenced electors or the elections in England. It is such an entertaining illustration of the ministerial oratory at that time that it is well worth quoting.

Lord Castlereagh, "in a most eloquent and appropriate manner, contrasted the time when he last visited this country with the present."[2] "The country," he observed, "was then in the utmost distress owing to the recurrence from a state of war to that of peace, for we had been engaged in a contest for our very existence as a nation, and in that contest Great Britain had triumphed, and crowned herself with glory. Providence, however, then, in order to check our exultation, had visited us with a most inclement season. He recollected, in a particular manner, that the wheat on a farm which was occupied by his father, was then covered with snow. Now, the contrast was most grateful, and it was his hope that prosperity would again visit the land. Nothing could exceed the beautiful verdure of this

[1] Oldfield's *Representative History*, vol. vi. p. 227.

[2] See *The Examiner*, 12th July 1818, p. 438, which takes the report from *The Belfast News Letter*.

"happy country, and he could assure them it was not confined to this country, but it was general. Arts and manufactures also were again flourishing, and all was one active scene of employment. Linen had again found a good market, and he felt confident that their abundant harvest would find a market in Great Britain." He further observed "That every human institution was liable to defects; but every person must be convinced that under no Constitution did the people enjoy a greater share of civil and religious liberty than in Great Britain; and as long as freedom of discussion in both Houses of Parliament existed, as long as we were possessed of a free Press, no real abuse would be brought forward without its correction or a remedy being found. Changes or reforms must take place deliberately, for all changes made hastily or abruptly came to no good."

One is almost tempted to believe that this silliness was palmed off on the newspapers as a practical joke.

The remaining Cabinet Minister who sat in the House of Commons was George Canning. His is the only case in this general election of a Minister contesting one of the larger constituencies in the kingdom. He contested Liverpool, where there were 2600 electors, and where, as Oldfield tells us, "The corporation always influences the return of one member. In the choice of the other the freemen are very eccentric."[1] He had, it will be remembered, contested it in 1812 against Brougham, and therefore he was familiar with the nature of the work. He spoke often, but there is not to be found in his speeches any trace of an idea that he could in any way influence other elections than that which he was fighting by any speeches which he could make. It was not until the election was over that he delivered a

[1] Oldfield's *Representative History*, vol. iv. p. 107.

speech which was meant for a larger audience than the people of Liverpool.

Thus then, out of the six Cabinet Ministers who were in the House of Commons, one alone faced the ordeal of an appeal to a large constituency. Evidently, therefore, the electoral Platform played but a small part then in ministerial calculations. This same conclusion is confirmed if we investigate the cases of some of the minor members of the Government—that is to say, those who were not in the Cabinet.

Lord Palmerston, the Secretary of War, was returned for Cambridge University without a contest, and without a speech. Charles Long, the Paymaster of the Forces, was returned for Haslemere, a pocket borough with 64 voters, the property of the Earl of Lonsdale. Wallace, Vice-President of the Board of Trade, was returned for Weymouth, where the few voters that there were, were "the property of an individual, and their decision entirely at his pleasure."

The Attorney-General was returned for Dorchester, where, though there were 200 electors, the Earl of Shaftesbury had the nomination of one member; and the Solicitor-General was returned for Eye, where the nomination of Lord Cornwallis "was implicitly submitted to."

Charles Grant, the Chief Secretary for Ireland, sat for Inverness-shire, of which county constituency he was the "Patron," and could therefore return himself, which he did. There was no contest, and as there were but 55 electors in the county, many of whom would not attend the election, speechifying was scarcely to be expected. Mr. Grant, however, made a speech, which was quite thrown away so far as electors were concerned, but which for us throws much light on the

inner workings of the minds of some of those holding high official position at this period, and explains how readily they gave themselves to the repressive measures of the previous session.

"With respect to the necessity, the indispensable duty of maintaining the Constitution in all its parts, and of transmitting it unimpaired to our posterity, we are one and indivisible. Against those pernicious maxims of modern times, which, under the pretext of correcting, would subvert the Constitution; against that system, if anything so vague in its notions, and so irregular in its movements can be called a system—against that system, as false in policy as it is spurious in philosophy, as absurd in theory as it is foul and bloody in practice—against that system, which has for its object spoliation, and for its means impiety and anarchy, which would teach us that government, as such, is oppression; that social order and tyranny are synonymous terms; that the law of property is the law of robbery; that there is nothing sacred in morals, nothing venerable and adorable in religion,—against this system I am persuaded that we are prepared, heart and hand, to contend even to the last gasp. We love the Constitution—that Constitution which is equal to the rich and the poor—that Constitution which was the cradle that sheltered our infancy, is now the magnificent temple in which our manhood is consecrated to virtue and renown."[1]

From this review of the position of the leading members of the Government as regarded constituencies it is evident that, excepting Canning, not one single member of the Government in the Cabinet, or out of it, need have been influenced in Parliament in any way

[1] *The Late Elections*, p. 451.

by a regard to the views of his constituents, or be under any necessity of appealing to them from the Platform for their judgment and approval. The fact is a most important one, and meant much. Ministers and sub-ministers, in fact, took very good care of themselves so far as constituencies were concerned, and were practically completely independent of any electoral control whatever. No wonder then that they objected to Parliamentary reform. Their example was followed by as many ordinary or non-official members of Parliament as possible.

Oldfield, in his *Representative History*,[1] written about 1815-17, stated that in England and Wales 16 members were returned by Government nomination, 218 members were returned by the nomination of 87 peers, and 137 members by the nomination of 90 commoners, or a total of 371 members in England and Wales were returned practically by nomination.

Allowing for some exaggeration in his calculation, though there is no reason to suppose that he exaggerated the evil state of so-called Parliamentary representation, it is evident enough that the scope for Platform work at election time was by no means so considerable as at first sight might be thought. A detailed though brief account of some of the elections will enable us, however, to form a clearer idea.

At this election there were 95 contests in Great Britain, of which 75 were in English boroughs and 10 in English counties, 5 in Scotch boroughs and 5 in Scotch counties. Many of these contests were quite unimportant, from the Platform point of view. Thus at Camelford, in Cornwall, the successful candidates got 13 votes, and the unsuccessful 10,[2] but then a "contest

[1] Vol. vi. p. 292.

[2] *The Late Elections*, p. 55.

"for a Cornish borough has nothing to do with political principles so far as votes were concerned," and both sets of candidates were in the ministerial interest. At Ilchester, where there were 60 electors, there was a personal and not a political contest; at Cardiff "a friendly opposition to save some other"; at numerous other places the contests were mainly for family influence. Thus at Chester, "The contest does not appear to be founded upon the merit or demerit of any of the candidates, or in favour of any particular political opinions, but solely to rest upon personal like and dislike to one particular family";[1] and of the contest at Evesham our anonymous author wrote: "This, and similar contests, do not assume so much the character of political as of personal opposition, for possibly the candidates opposed to each other may accord in political opinions, but in their persons is determined the question of 'who shall be the organ of those opinions'?"[2] It was quite an exception if among the small boroughs the contests developed any Platforming. Boroughbridge, in Yorkshire, was one of the exceptions. Here a Mr. Lawson contested the seat in avowed opposition to the influence of the Duke of Newcastle, and he spoke a good deal, and to such purpose, that he actually succeeded in getting a majority of votes. In the course of one of his speeches he graphically describes the state of more boroughs than Boroughbridge. He spoke of disturbing the tranquillity of the borough: "A tranquillity like the tranquillity of the grave, full of rottenness, if not of corruption—a tranquillity forgetful of its own existence, a dormant apathy of spirit, a stagnant insensibility to all vigorous and energetic virtue—a tranquillity not resembling that of the calm summer

[1] *The Late Elections*, p. 72. [2] *Ibid.* p. 117.

sky, but rather the gloom of the dull and cloudy atmosphere, and which nothing but a violent concussion of the elements can restore to its native and elastic purity."[1]

It must have been a startling novelty at Boroughbridge to hear any candidate speak, for our anonymous author tells us: "Owing to the quiet way in which elections had been conducted there for some time, much in the same way as vestry meetings, a member had not thought it necessary to show his face for several elections. The two late members had never been near the place."

The larger and the more popular the constituencies, the more use do we find made of the Platform by the late members for justifying their past conduct; the more do we find them and the new candidates discussing from the Platform the principal political events or tendencies of the time. Thus, at Hereford, where there were 1200 electors, and where there had not been a contest since 1784, all the candidates made speeches, the two late members referring to their past conduct, and the new candidate entering into a long statement of his political views, declaring that his political principles had for their basis the most sincere attachment to the established constitution of our country in the Church and State. At Ipswich, where there were over 600 electors, one of the candidates declared "that he should support Protestant ascendency to the utmost of his powers, and that he was against dangerous principles." Speech was, however, of little value here, as we are told that in reality "the contest was more one in the amount of corruption than for political principle." At Preston, where there were 2200 electors, and at Southampton, where there were 700

[1] *The Late Elections*, p. 14.

electors, political speeches were also made. At Colchester Mr. Wildman spoke, saying, "That he still remained a strong, zealous, and unchangeable supporter of the Protestant ascendency both in Church and State, and pledged himself to oppose the Catholic claims. He was in favour of the measures of the present Ministers, and he professed his own personal independence." At Canterbury there was a "spirited" contest, the candidates being a Mr. Lushington (a Treasury Secretary), Mr. Baker, who had represented the city for twenty years, on opposition principles, and Lord Clifton, an Irish peer. The election is solely remarkable for a most unblushing speech by the Treasury Secretary. He began by boasting of the happy termination of the war, and then referred to his having accepted office. "It is," he said, "an erroneous idea of some people, that a member holding an emolument under Government is not at liberty to exercise his free discretion. . . . For my part, I am a strenuous supporter of the elective franchise. It is, I conceive, a sight highly calculated to impress the mind with the value of British liberty, to see the colours waving and the cockades flying in all directions; and I think myself justified in asserting, that I never stood for any reasonable expense. An expensive election I do not conceive a desirable relish for any member, but I trust I have always acted with a degree of liberality and spirit, which will entitle me to the respect of my brother freemen. . . . I have always endeavoured to serve my friends and constituents to the best of my ability, and only regret that applications were made to me which were not in my power to comply with. I hope I shall have it in my power to do more for you than I have hitherto done." At Bristol, where there was a large constituency, there was a good fight, and much

Platforming. "The election for this city," says our anonymous compiler, "though in its outset one of the most vacillating, presents in its progress and termination the character of the best principled contest, and the greatest political victory in the kingdom." There were three candidates—Mr. Davis, Mr. Protheroe, and Colonel Baillie. The latter never appeared on the hustings or the Platform at all, and his cause was left to his friends to fight. The others, however, spoke frequently and very fully. Davis was a Tory, and had represented the constituency in the defunct Parliament. At his nomination he recounted his work in Parliament: "During the period in which I have represented this city, questions of the most vital importance, relating both to a state of warfare and of peace, have been discussed in Parliament. My voice in deciding them has been influenced by no selfish motive. I have looked only to your interests as involved in the general welfare of the empire at large. Sometimes I have been found opposed to the Crown, and at other times my vote has militated even against the opinions of my most respectable constituents. But, gentlemen, this is unavoidable, if your representative is to have an independent voice in the senate. This conduct redounds as much to your honour as it does to his credit, that he should give the most mature consideration to any important subject, and not decide upon it but through the strictest scrutiny of his conscience and his judgment." He had supported the vigorous prosecution of the war; he had been on the Committee to examine into the income and to modify and economise the expenditure of the State, as the result of which the expense of the State had been largely retrenched. He was opposed to Roman Catholic emancipation, and he was a strong supporter of the Established

Church. His speeches dealt fairly well with the political questions of the day.

Protheroe, who had also been a member, had at the previous election stood on independent Whig principles, but had, in many instances, by his votes and speeches, acted in a manner directly opposed to his professions. He now made a long speech defending himself. He was a good deal "heckled" as regarded having voted for the Property tax, for the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, and for the Indemnity Act, but still the constituency returned both him and Davis. Altogether, the account of this election, which lasted five days, gives one a favourable impression of the genuineness of some of the elections in England at this time; but it is to be remembered that Bristol was one of the few open constituencies in the country, and was certainly one of the most intelligent.

The metropolis was, as usual, the scene of much political speaking, and here the Platform seemed to be of some real use. The constituencies were large and independent, and the electors keen and energetic. Thomas Attwood, of Birmingham, who some twelve or thirteen years later was to be one of the most conspicuous men in England as one of the leaders of the Reform agitation, does not, however, give a very favourable description of the London electorate at this time. In a letter to his wife, written on the 30th June 1818 in London, he said: "The election makes great disturbances here. The poor wretches who clamour for Burdett and Liberty, meaning Blood and Anarchy, are far worse in ignorance and stupidity than our Birmingham mobs. But they have got rascals among them who excite them almost to madness. It is the greatest nonsense in the world to attempt to reason with them. They have

their opinions because they are told so. . . . Reason has nothing at all to do with their conduct. It is all a mere question of passion, and therefore such creatures ought to have nothing to do with politics."[1]

The elections in London City, Westminster, and Southwark, were as keenly contested as any one could wish, and there was a great deal of speaking. For the representation of the city of London, consisting of four seats, there were six candidates, and as the election lasted many days, there were no end of meetings, and every day addresses were delivered by nearly all the candidates from the hustings.

To turn, however, from borough elections to county elections. Here contests were fairly numerous, considering the enormous expense of a county contest at this period; and at all of them we find that the Platform was very largely employed, and that many regular political speeches were made. Thus in Berkshire all the candidates spoke, and one of them, Mr. Charles Dundas, declared "That during the whole of his Parliamentary career he had been actuated by the purest motives for the public good, having never sought for personal aggrandisement, or received one shilling of Government money. He challenged the most jealous inquiry into his public conduct, and was ready to answer any question that any gentleman might think proper to put to him." Another of the candidates based his claims on the grounds that "He had uniformly upheld the cause of the people, had voted for economy and retrenchment, and was an advocate for a mild, temperate, and practicable reform in the House of Commons, though he would not support, at the hazard of universal anarchy, the

[1] See *Life of Thomas Attwood*, by C. M. Wakefield. The book was printed for private circulation only, but is to be found in the British Museum.

"rash schemes and pernicious theories of visionary and violent innovators."

In Westmoreland there was a contest, "to which the attention of the whole kingdom was directed through means of the Press." Brougham contested a seat against the Lowther interest, and wherever he was there was sure to be plenty of Platforming. He spoke several times a day for four days; most of his speeches, however, being devoted more to local electioneering points than to matters of wider interest. But all in vain was all his speaking. Great county interests were then almost all-powerful. Even Brougham was unable to overthrow them in this instance, though, as he told his supporters, he "kindled a flame that would burst from his ashes to consume their oppressors and light them to triumph."

In Wiltshire there was also a contest. "We do not find much conflict of political feeling in the progress of the contest; the question was not, whose political feelings best suit the county, but whether certain family connections are to be perpetuated in it. Both during the canvass and the progress of the poll the county was kept in a state of great irritation. . . . Mr. Bennett could not obtain a hearing during the poll, whose continuance was marked by daily personal altercations between the partisans of the rival candidates. Mr. Wellesley sometimes obtained a hearing (it depended upon the possession of the hustings) when employed in refuting the idea of the county being carried by his *long* purse."

In Somersetshire there was also a contest which lasted for four days. On the day of the nomination there was "one of the largest assemblages of persons ever known in the city of Wells," and there was much speaking.

In Kent, at the contest, numerous political speeches were made, including references to Catholic claims and Parliamentary reform, and there was a good deal of "heckling," so much so that one of the candidates wanted to have all the questions blended together, "so that he might know when he was done being catechised." His principal questioner retorted that he had no more questions to ask, but he conceived candidates came for the purpose of being catechised.

In Devon there was a contest which lasted six days, all the candidates speaking every evening after the close of the day's polling; but it was only at the end of the second day's election apparently that there was any reference to politics. Lord Ebrington having then declared, "If it be a crime to oppose the measures of Ministers who have done more than any other to ruin the country, I plead guilty to the cause." Sir T. Acland complainingly remarked, "I suppose I must follow the noble lord's example, and have a word or two of politics." At the end of the sixth day Sir T. Acland retired, and from the speech he then delivered he appeared to be sensible of several causes of discontent on the part of his late constituents which led to his defeat.

In Lincolnshire the contest may be fairly said to have been one of political opinions, and "was conducted throughout with a determined spirit, but in a most gentlemanly and courteous manner." The speeches were regular political ones, the respective candidates basing their claims for support on concurrence in the ministerial policy and measures, or in condemnation of them.

It is clear from these examples, that in contested county elections the Platform was very largely used; but it is to be remembered that at this period the

polling took place altogether at the county town, and, therefore, its use was thus confined to the one spot.

As regards the county elections, however, its use was not confined to those counties where contested elections were fought; but in several counties, where there was no contest, the candidates made regular political speeches at the time of the nomination, though this, however, was but a small matter in comparison with a prolonged contest.

Thus, at Norfolk, Mr. Coke made a vehement political speech on the iniquities of Ministers, and in Northamptonshire, Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire, and other counties speeches, of a sort, were made. This was the case also in some of the borough elections where there was no contest.

Thus at Newcastle-upon-Tyne one of the candidates who had been the member made a good political speech; he referred to his conduct in Parliament as the plea on which he grounded his claim to their support, he recalled to them his opposition to the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, and to the Indemnity Act, and he declared himself in favour of Parliamentary reform, though averse to annual Parliaments and universal suffrage.

As another illustration I may mention the case of Shrewsbury, though the candidate's speech was a short one. "Gentlemen—My political conduct is before you. I have supported the Administration when I approved of their measures, and I have decidedly opposed them when I thought them wrong. I briefly promise to you, that the same course I shall continue to pursue, if you do me the honour to re-elect me."

Reviewing the proceedings at this general election not merely in contested counties and boroughs, but in the non-contested also, it is, I think, evident that

considerable use was made of the Platform in England by the candidates. It must, however, be also remarked that with one or two notable exceptions, the speeches were not of a high order, nor, if we omit the cases of the larger constituencies, was there much of argumentative style about them. I have said "in England" because, in Scotland, the electoral Platform, even, had no existence at all. There were over 2,000,000 inhabitants in Scotland, and there were about 2500 electors. In the counties the electors were very few in number, but they elected their members. In the boroughs they did not even do that. The towns (except Edinburgh) were grouped into districts consisting of four or five towns, and each district was allowed one member. The corporation of each of the towns in the district elected a single delegate, and the four or five delegates thus elected met together, and elected the member. As an illustration of the working of the system the case of Glasgow may be cited. Though one of the most opulent cities of the kingdom, with a population of some 80,000, instead of electing a member, it only elected a delegate, and this delegate was chosen, not by the people of Glasgow, but by the Corporation of thirty-two persons, who were self-elected. This delegate had only one voice of four in the choice of the member of Parliament, in common with the delegates of three little towns, the inhabitants of which were not more than 2000.

Under this condition of things evidently there was no scope for the electoral Platform in Scotland. The so-called contests were mere farces, and though a few candidates made speeches, their hearers were few, nor would any amount of speechifying have influenced the select number of electors.

In England, as we have seen, the state of representation was not so bad as this, but though the Platform had a certain scope in England, and was used to a considerable extent at election time, still there were circumstances even there which detracted very much from its effectiveness. These circumstances were the manner in which elections were conducted.

Cobbett, much as he was in favour of general elections, described them as "scenes of notorious bribery and corruption," and denounced the "meanness, lying, drunkenness, violence, fraud, and false-swearing, which spread themselves over the country at every general election."[1] And Bamford wrote even more strongly about them. He said: "They are generally conducted in a manner which is disgraceful to civilised society. The proceedings of one of these good old English events is more like 'hell broke loose' than anything human. Behold the banners, hear the music—mere glare and noise; the speakers—one side yelled dumb, the other drummed deaf—good men bullied by ruffians; demagogues cheered; scurrility applauded; fraud devised and practised; truth suppressed; falsehood blazoned; courage threatened; cowardice rewarded; vanity flattered; cupidity bribed; sobriety scoffed; gluttony indulged; conscience hushed; honour abandoned; wrong triumphant; right abashed and condemned."[2]

In many places too there was considerable rioting, which was manifestly against the use of the Platform. "The elections are carried on with great violence,"[3] wrote Greville.

At Colchester the hustings was stormed, and "In about five minutes the whole fabric was razed to the ground."

[1] *Political Register*, 1816, vol. xxxi. p. 339.

[2] Bamford, vol. i. p. 13.

[3] *The Greville Memoirs*, vol. i. p. 3.

At Northampton each party attacked the headquarters of their opponents, and the Riot Act was read. At Southampton, where the contest lasted six days, "The election was conducted, so far as the mob was concerned, in a most riotous and disgraceful manner." At the Middlesex election one of the candidates spoke "in intervals of casual silence."

Now, if we take this general election as fairly typical of others about this period, and I think it may be so taken, the truth appears to be, that the real effect of the Platform at a general election lay not so much in changing opinions and getting votes at the time, as in the great impulse which it gave to popular feeling.

Canning declared at the Liverpool election that "The spirit of popular elections is the spirit which keeps alive the frame of the Constitution,"[1] and a writer in the *Edinburgh Review*[2] of this same year has enlarged more fully on this text. He said: "Meetings for elections are by far the safest and most effective of all popular assemblies. They are brought together by the Constitution; they have a legal character; they display the ensigns of public authority; they assemble men of all ranks and opinions; and, in them, the people publicly and conspicuously bestow some of the highest prizes pursued by a generous ambition. Hence they derive a consequence, and give a sense of self-importance to their humblest members, which would be vainly sought for in spontaneous meetings. They lend a part of their own seriousness and dignity to other meetings occasioned by the election, and even to those which at other times are really, or even nominally, composed of electors.

"In elections political principles cease to be mere

[1] Canning's Speeches, p. 210.

[2] *Edinburgh Review*, vol. xxxi. p. 197, "Universal Suffrage," December 1818, by Sir James Mackintosh.

"abstractions. They are embodied in individuals; and the cold conviction of a truth, or the languid approbation of a measure, is animated by attachment for leaders, and hostility to adversaries. Every political passion is warmed in the contest. Even the outward circumstances of the scene strike the imagination, and affect the feelings. The recital of them daily spreads enthusiasm over a country. The various fortunes of the combat excite anxiety and agitation on all sides, and an opportunity is offered of discussing almost every political question, under circumstances where the hearts of hearers and readers take part in the argument; and the issue of a controversy is regarded by the nation with some degree of the same solicitude as the event of a battle. In this manner is formed democratical ascendency, which is most perfect when the greatest numbers of independent judgments influence the measures of Government. Reading may, indeed, increase the number and intelligence of those whose sentiments compose public opinion, but numerous assemblies, and consequently popular elections, can alone generate the courage and zeal which form so large a portion of its power."

There remains for our consideration the third and most important aspect of the Platform at this general election—namely, How far did the electors use it as a means for exercising a control over their representatives, and exacting pledges from them?

The power of the Platform, viewed as a great political institution, consists, as has already been pointed out, in the amount of its control over Parliament, exercised through its control over the individual representatives. What control did it exercise in this way at this election? Was that control showing signs of increasing? And what were the views expressed by the candidates on the subject?

These were the really crucial points of the whole matter. In an unreformed Parliament, such as was this Parliament of 1818, the question could only arise in a somewhat limited degree, for it did not touch the large number of members returned for rotten boroughs, with practically no electorate. I have already adverted to the views held at different times previous to this, as to the relation of a representative to his constituents. Canning, six years previous to this election, at the close of the Liverpool Election of 1812, thus laid down his views on the subject, which were, I think, a long way in advance, in a democratic direction, of those held by Burke and Wilberforce. He said:[1] "Gentlemen, if I did not retain the independence of my own judgment in the House of Commons, I should be but an unworthy representative of the independent and enlightened community which sends me thither. It may happen that your judgment may occasionally come in conflict with my own. Men of independent minds may honestly differ on subjects which admit of a variety of views. In all such cases I promise you, not indeed wholly to submit my judgment to yours—you would despise me if I made so extravagant a profession,—but I promise you that any difference of opinion between us will always lead me to distrust my own views, carefully to examine, and, if erroneous, frankly to correct them.

"Gentlemen, our judgments may clash, but our interests never; no interests of mine shall ever come in competition with yours. I promise you further that, hoping as I earnestly do that the connection, of which the foundation is this day auspiciously laid, may last to the end of my political life; yet if, unfortunately,

[1] See *Speeches of the Right Hon. George Canning*, edited by Thomas Kaye (1825), p. 41.

"occasions should occur (I cannot foresee or imagine any such) on which there should arise between us, on points of serious importance, a radical and irreconcilable difference of opinion, I will not abuse my trust, but will give you the earliest opportunity of recalling or reconsidering your delegation of it."

This was a most important pronouncement, very different from anything hitherto avowed by any statesman of first rank. The subject thus treated by Canning cropped up in Parliament in 1816.

Lord Milton said: "If gentlemen looked merely to their own constituents, and acted according to their opinions, then indeed they became merely delegates. But the constitutional principle was this—that the House of Commons at large were to act with the people at large."[1]

Sir J. Newport suggested the expediency of members "paying obedience to the wishes of their constituents, and if such an obedience could not be observed, with due deference to their own feelings, to surrender the trust into other hands." And Mr. Rose said: "He would be glad to know how many seats would have been resigned, on the question of the Corn Bill, if that principle had been followed. At that time fifty Petitions were presented in one evening against the proposed Bill, which was, notwithstanding, carried into effect."

At this General Election of 1818 many of the candidates publicly acknowledged their responsibility to their constituents for an account of their stewardship, and based their claims for re-election on their conduct in the past.

For instance, Lord Nugent, who was contesting

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xxxiii. p. 466.

Aylesbury, and who had been member for that constituency, said: "I now call on any and every man, who may think he has just cause to complain of my conduct while I was his representative, to state his complaints publicly, and to meet me here fairly, and in the face of day, with all he feels towards me of objection or reproach, I am here prepared, not less in inclination than in duty, to meet and to answer him."

Many of the candidates condescended to give some promises, or rather some general statement of their views. Several of them avowed their intention to support the existing Constitution in Church and State, a few of them referred to the questions of Parliamentary reform and Catholic emancipation, but most of the speeches were very vague and wordy.

As a candidate at one of the elections very truly remarked: "I am well aware that nothing can be more idle than the professions which are generally made by those who stand in the situation you now see me." And candidates had an evident aversion to pledging themselves towards any liberal measures or policy.

Mr. Bennett, at Shrewsbury, was an exception. He had been member, and was re-elected, and in his final speech he said: "I here pledge myself to devote my life to your service. As I have not made you hitherto any promise which I have broken, I shall act to the best of my judgment, except when I am instructed by you, and in those cases in which I shall receive your instructions, I am resolved to do one of two things—either to obey your voice, or if I should unfortunately differ from you in opinion, surrender into your hands the trust you have reposed in me."

This was the most extreme case. Most of the candidates took a highly independent tone. "I accepted

"your invitation," said, or rather wrote, one, "upon principles of perfect independence." "I will not go into Parliament shackled," wrote another.

At Aylesbury Lord Nugent, speaking on the subject of a previous pledge being given by a candidate, declared: "Chosen or rejected, I will retain to myself, unfettered and unbiassed, the exercise of my own discretion, according to my judgment, and according to my conscience."

At Bristol Protheroe, who had been in Parliament, said he "had been sent to Parliament as an independent man, who told you beforehand that he should be proud to have his judgment enlightened by yours upon all subjects, but that upon public questions he could acknowledge no direction but his own conscience. It is not a delegate, gentlemen, but a representative, that you send to Parliament."

In Gloucestershire Sir W. Guise said: "He should always feel pleasure in attending to the wishes of the freeholders of this great manufacturing county, at the same time reserving to himself the right of exercising his own judgment in the consideration of all subjects of importance."

In Kent Sir E. Knatchbull, when questioned about Parliamentary reform, said: "I shall be in my place, and will attend to the question, and whatever may be my honest opinion upon it, I will give my vote accordingly. . . . If I were to pledge myself to one thing or the other, I should pledge myself not to have the liberty of giving my vote according to my conscience, and nothing on earth shall ever deter me from giving my vote agreeably to the dictates of my honest conscience."

In Somersetshire Colonel G. Langton said: "The

representation of this county is the highest end and aim of my ambition, but even this honour may be purchased too dearly by the loss of integrity. I therefore will never accept it, but as its free and unrestrained representative."

Even the advanced Liberals of the time showed a dislike of restraint on their freedom in Parliament. Thus Waithman, a Radical, who stood for the city of London, said: "As to the doctrine of instructions he would not push it too far; he would not be for fettering representatives"; but in returning thanks for his election, he said, "It would be his endeavour to represent their opinions and feelings, to which he should always consider himself bound to conform when they were expressed by them legally assembled for that purpose."[1]

Joseph Hume's views on the subject are also interesting, though he represented one of those Scotch boroughs, as regarded which the whole system of election and representation was a farce. He said: "Anxious as he should always be to attend to the instructions and representations of his constituents, he took this opportunity to repeat, that he should in no instance consider himself bound to vote as they wished, unless his own conviction went with them. It often happened that measures of a public nature, when viewed with the eye of limited information, which must of

[1] Speaking in 1806, Waithman had said: "I never was so silly on any occasion as to maintain that it was the duty of the representative on every occasion to come and ask for instructions from his constituents. This would indeed be ridiculous. What I shall ever maintain is this—that on great, important, leading constitutional questions, it is the duty of the representative to listen to the voice of his constituents; and when their opinions are fully, fairly, and distinctly expressed, they ought implicitly to be obeyed. In ordinary cases representatives are to be guided in their vote by their feelings. On such grand occasions as those I have alluded to, I shall ever maintain that they are peremptorily bound to act in obedience to those from whom they derive their right to give any voice in Parliament."

"necessity be often the case in parts distant from the metropolis, appeared very different to those whose superior means of information and experience in the capital extend their views. Such might be the case with his constituents and him. . . . He could assure them he never would support any measure in the House of Commons that he could not defend before them here."

These quotations from the speeches of candidates at this election, most of whom were successful in their candidature, convey to us a sufficiently clear idea as to the amount of independence which candidates thought they might lay claim to at this period without endangering their chances of success. But there were unpleasant signs and portents in the political sky that such independence, however much it might be claimed, would not for ever be conceded.

Thus, in London city, Sir William Curtis (who had already served in six Parliaments as a representative of the city) said: "He should say one word on the doctrine of the right of constituents to instruct their representatives. Whenever the rights of the city of London came under the consideration of Parliament, he should constantly stand up for them, and would only on such occasions attend strictly to the wishes of the Livery. On questions, however, which related to the interests of the nation at large, he claimed the right of judging for himself."[1] He was not re-elected.

In Sussex one of the previous members was opposed because he was not thought a fit person to represent the county, as he had not attended to his Parliamentary duties; and in Southwark one of the members was unseated because he had voted contrary to the opinions and hostile to the interests of the people.

[1] See *The Examiner*, 1818, pp. 386, 407.

From a consideration of the details of this general election we may, I think, form certain reliable conclusions as to the position of the Platform at all general elections about this period. Viewing, then, the Platform as used by Ministers, or by candidates in counties or boroughs at contested or uncontested elections, one must acknowledge that one is not impressed with the amount of power it possessed. Certainly it could not be in any way yet regarded as an instrument of real political force in the nation. Ministers practically ignored it. What was termed an appeal to the electorate was in reality only an appeal to those who controlled the constituencies, to the great families of influence or faction in London, to the patrons of county constituencies, and to the owners of boroughs or borough-mongers. To keep these persons in perpetual leading-strings was the abiding aim and policy of Government, and not the winning of popular applause and esteem by a regard to the interests of the people.

A majority of these persons won over, either from considerations of self-interest, or by promises, or intrigues, or judiciously bestowed patronage, the result of the election was a foregone conclusion. From London issued forth the nominees of Ministers, and their friends and followers, to go through the form of election.

There was no need, therefore, for Ministers to make any appeal to the country from the Platform, to present any definite policy to the electorate. The whole thing was manipulated and arranged by them long previous to the arbitrament of the poll. Thus it resulted that, in a large number of constituencies, especially rotten ones, the Platform had no existence, and that in many others the form only of election, and not the substance, was to be found.

Again, in several of the constituencies where the Platform was a good deal in evidence, its influence was entirely subordinate to wholesale bribery and corruption.

In some of the counties, however, where one great family interest would be sometimes pitted against another, it was often of great service; but it was only in the few large civic constituencies, which were too large to be bribed, or too numerous to be intimidated, that the Platform was a real genuine power. These constituencies, however, were so few, that though the Platform was a power in them, it was not a power in the State.

Much of the cause of this weakness of the electoral Platform was due to the limited number of the electorate. There were not enough electors to make the expression of their opinion really formidable to their rulers, for the great bulk of the mass of the people was wholly outside the electorate. Something of the weakness too was the result of the difficulty of communication still existing, the difficulty of collecting the people together for political purposes.

The Platform as a political power at general election time was, in fact, not much more than in its infancy, but it was the infancy of a Hercules, with vast promise of development. It might be weak now, but the ingrained spirit of liberty and self-government in the race was soon to burst forth with irresistible strength into sovereign power, and the electoral Platform was to be the means for making the popular will supreme in the government of the country.

CHAPTER XI

THE THIRD SUPPRESSION OF THE PLATFORM

THE new Parliament met on the 14th of January 1819, little changed in composition from that which preceded it. The popular party had gained slightly. It was computed, at the time, that the ranks of the regular opposition, all sections included, had been increased by some 30 votes or so, and Tierney, speaking soon after the meeting of Parliament, bore testimony to a change not recorded in mere figures. "He now spoke," he said, "in a House to which had been returned a larger proportion of men connected with no party than he ever remembered before. They were of a description of persons who professed that they would vote without reference to either side of the House; and that they would weigh measures and not men." But this, in those times of ministerial temptation, was rather an unstable class of men, very open to ministerial approaches, and not to be relied on by the people.

Still, the general results of the elections and, more particularly, the popular victories in London city, and a few other places, afforded some encouragement to the popular party.

The Seditious Meetings Act, or at least that portion of it which related to seditious meetings, and debating

societies, had expired in the previous July. Whether the general election had somewhat exhausted the energies of the people, or whether they were waiting to see if the new House of Commons would be more disposed than the last towards considering their wants, and alleviating some of the hardness of their circumstances, the Platform had been quiescent during the autumn of 1818, and, with one exception, remained so during all the earlier part of the session of 1819. The exception was a meeting at Manchester on the 18th of January, which was got up by the reformers of that town, and which Hunt was invited to attend. On his arrival at Ardwick, near Manchester, he was met by a deputation from the town, and a great crowd of people who unyoked his horses, and dragged his carriage into the town. A procession accompanying him with banners bearing mottoes—"Rights of Man," "Universal Suffrage," "No Corn Laws."

About half-past eleven o'clock the crowd reached St. Peter's Field. Hunt[1] ascended the Platform and made a speech. He alluded to the Boroughreeve having refused to call the meeting, and remarked that they were called together as legally and constitutionally as if the municipal authorities had been present. "Some gentlemen had proposed a Petition, a Petition to that House of Commons, which, when last assembled, had kicked their prayers and petitions out of doors. Would they submit again to petition that House? or would they come forward as men, as Englishmen, and demand their rights?" Here the word "Remonstrate," from the assembled thousands drowned the voice of the speaker, and it was agreed that a Remonstrance to the Prince Regent should supersede the Petition which had been

[1] *The Examiner*, 24th January 1819.

prepared. Hunt concluded his speech by strenuously enforcing the necessity of a prompt and efficient muster of the friends of reform, "in order to counteract the mischievous attempts that were secretly making to undermine their liberties," and expressed his detestation of the odious Corn Bill or starvation law, the repeal of which was the object of their present assembling. Several other speeches followed from men who stood at the head of the Manchester reformers, and the meeting broke up. About 10,000 persons, it was said, were present; but not the least disposition to riot or turbulence was evinced, nor was there any personal insult offered to any individual whatever.

In February, Westminster was enlivened by an electoral contest, extending over a period of fifteen days, for the seat rendered vacant by the death of Sir S. Romilly; the Platform was given plenty of occupation at it, and the newspapers were filled with reports of its proceedings.

But with these exceptions the Platform was idle during the first half of the year 1819. Such meetings as did take place were on another subject—namely, in favour of the Corn Laws, but they were not on a scale to call for any special notice. A large number of Petitions, praying for further protection of agriculture, were presented to Parliament, but few on other subjects, and those not from people assembled at meetings.

As the session drew near its end, however, signs of recommencing agitation in parts of the country began to make themselves apparent. Distressing accounts came from the manufacturing districts, of the large number of unemployed workmen, of the consequent wretchedness, and increase of pauperism. Notwithstanding all which the Government, early in June,

determined on adding £3,000,000 to the taxation of the country, the great bulk of the new taxes being imposed on wool, malt, spirits, and tobacco.

Weighed down with troubles, the people began once more to have recourse to their one friend—the Platform. On the 14th June "a most numerous assemblage of unemployed workmen" met at Hunslet Moor, near Leeds. A "stage" for the speakers had been previously erected, and several persons addressed the meeting. The great theme dwelt on was the necessity for Parliamentary reform—that was the one panacea which the distressed people were never tired of invoking. Several resolutions were passed as preliminary to a Declaration to be signed by all "who are determined not to become passive slaves"; and it was nearly ten at night before the assemblage dispersed. On the same day a meeting of the inhabitants of Ashton-under-Lyne took place, some 12,000 to 15,000 persons being present. The Reverend J. Harrison took the chair. He gave a most pathetic account of the deplorable condition of the poor, and exhorted his hearers to observe peace and good order. Various resolutions were passed which dwelt on the means of remedying the people's distresses; on Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments; on the Constitution of the House of Commons as now existing, "which was a mockery"; on the Corn Laws; on the contempt with which their Petitions were treated; on the suspension of the laws "in order to be able to keep men in dungeons"; and on the "Acts of Indemnity" to screen Government officers from deserved punishment; and finally, on the necessity of resistance to increased taxation until every sinecure and pension should be abolished. The people dispersed without any tumult.[1]

[1] *The Examiner*, 27th June 1819.

On the 16th June a numerous meeting of operative weavers took place at Glasgow, and a resolution was carried for Annual Parliaments, Universal Suffrage, and a diminution of taxation.

Another meeting was held at Hunslet Moor on 21st June. A Mr. Booth took the chair. The old lesson was repeated. "We can," he said, "only attribute our distress to the misrule of Ministers and the defective state of our representative system." A man named Petre made a very violent speech, but instead of its receiving approbation it gave great offence to many, and it was insinuated that he was a Government spy, endeavouring to lead the people into actions which would enable the Government to suppress the right of Platform speech.

A numerous meeting was held at Dewsbury, in Yorkshire, on the 21st, at which reform was demanded. Similar meetings were also held the same day at Manchester, and at other places in Yorkshire and Lancashire. "These different assemblies everywhere conducted themselves peaceably, and there was no occasion for calling on either the civil or military power."

It was beginning to be evident that the civic population of the country, temporarily silenced by the repressive legislation of 1817, was again moving. Nor was it to be wondered at. The only wonder was that they were so submissive, so long-suffering, so quiet. Parliament had done nothing for them—had, on the contrary, added to their burdens; it had turned a deaf ear to their complaints; it had spurned their petitions; it persisted in maintaining for its own advantage the most outrageous abuses, and perpetrating the most shameful jobs. Constituted by a corrupt and degraded

system of so-called representation, the Commons House of Parliament systematically set the interests of its majority above the interests of the people, and resented with violence the least indication of a movement which suggested the curtailment of their selfishly-used power, or the bringing of the House more into accordance with the views and interests of the people. "Reform is innovation; innovation is revolution; revolution means the guillotine and the dagger; down with reform." Such was the exaggerated formula with which was justified the maintenance of the existing order of things.

Though the ministerial majority possessed the power to refuse reform, they could not prevent the subject being discussed. And on the 1st July Sir F. Burdett gave the question an additional impulse in the country by bringing forward a motion about it in Parliament.[1] "He was convinced," he said, "that, according to the true principles of the English Constitution, every man is entitled to participate in the power of making those laws by which he is governed—to some share in the appointment of those who dispose of his liberty, his property, and his life. . . . He could not feel any apprehension from pursuing too far the ancient and recognised common law maxim, the corner-stone of the edifice of our liberties, 'that the people of England have a property in their own goods, which are not to be taken from them without their own consent'; in other words, that they are not constitutionally liable to be taxed without their own consent, expressed by a full, free, and fair representation in Parliament. On this principle he stood, as upon a rock, from which he thought it impossible to be removed."

But the Government would have none of it.

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xl. 1819, vol. xl. p. 1440.

Waithman "implored the House to take this subject into its most serious consideration, to apply a remedy, to carry tranquillity and confidence to the people";[1] but the motion was rejected by 153 votes to 58, and once more the masses of the people of England were told that the House of Commons—the people's House—should remain a close corporation—once more were they shown that a phalanx of peers and boroughmongers were determined at all costs to retain the monopoly of Government which the existing Constitution gave them.

And so the people were driven to the Platform, to meetings, and resolutions, to speeches, which now would be regarded as harmless, but which then were regarded as seditious, or treasonable, if legal ingenuity could twist them into being so. The truer the speeches were, and the more self-evident and uncontradictable the resolutions adopted by the meetings, the more wroth were the Government and their followers.

As the summer went on the agitation in the manufacturing districts grew apace, and the local authorities grew alarmed. On the 1st July five magistrates of Lancashire made the following representation to the Government: "Upon the general view of the subject, we cannot have a doubt that some alarming insurrection is in contemplation. Of the deep distresses of the manufacturing classes of this extensive population your Lordship is fully apprised, and the disaffected and ill-disposed lose no opportunity of instilling the worst principles into the unhappy sufferers in these times, attributing their calamities not to any event which cannot be controlled, but to the general measures of Government and Parliament; and when the people are oppressed with hunger, we do not wonder at their

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xl. p. 1492.

"giving ear to any doctrines which they are told will redress their grievances. Although we cannot but applaud the hitherto peaceable demeanour of many of the labouring classes, yet we do not calculate upon their remaining unmoved. Urged on by the harangues of a few desperate demagogues, we anticipate at no distant period a general rising, and possessing no power to prevent the meetings which are weekly held, we, as magistrates, are at a loss how to stem the influence of dangerous and seditious doctrines which are continually disseminated. To these meetings and the unbounded liberty of the Press we refer the principal weight of the evil which we apprehend."[1]

And on the 13th of July, at the Quarter Sessions for the county of Chester, a resolution was passed by the magistrates stating, "That it appears that various public meetings have lately been held in this and the neighbouring counties, at which evil-disposed and designing persons, taking advantage of the depression of trade and the consequent distress, have wickedly disseminated inflammatory doctrines, and under the false pretext of Parliamentary reform, have vilified the constituted authorities, inciting thereby the ignorant and unwary to insurrection and the commission of crimes."

Though numerous meetings were being held in many parts of the country, there was, whilst Parliament sat, no sufficient excuse even for such a Government as was then in power, to revive either the Suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, or the Seditious Meetings Act; and Parliament was prorogued on the 13th of July without any restrictive legislation being adopted. On the eve of the prorogation, however—namely, on the

[1] See *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 230—"Papers relative to the internal state of the country."

12th of July—a public meeting took place, which, had the intelligence of it reached London sooner, might have altered the date of the prorogation. It was held at Birmingham, on Newhall Hill, "for the purpose of considering of the best means of obtaining a representation of the people of this town in Parliament, and also of the representation of all the unrepresented inhabitants of the Empire."

The meeting was not a very brilliant affair, but it was altogether different from any that had preceded it. It disconcerted the Government more than any other that had been held, and was instructive as showing how deeply the minds of the people were running on Parliamentary reform, and to what devices they were prepared to resort to obtain it. In papers subsequently laid before Parliament, a description of the meeting was given, evidently not by a friendly hand.[1]

"An attempt was first made to collect a crowd by a miserable procession, as it was called, of Major Cartwright (a veteran reformer),[2] Wooller, and Edmunds, in a street chariot carrying two flags, and by one Maddocks, whose father had been executed, and brother transported, 'upon a bank prosecution.' The chair was taken by Edmunds (the proprietor of a newspaper). From 10,000 to 25,000 persons were present, of whom, however, a great proportion were women and children. The most violent speaker was Lewis; the tenor of all the speeches was abuse of the body *calling itself* the House of Commons."

Edmunds, Maddocks, a schoolmaster, and Wooller, spoke; and the novel idea was propounded, that as Birmingham had no representative in Parliament, and

[1] Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, 1819, vol. xli. p. 233.

[2] He was aged eighty-two at the time.

Parliament would not give Birmingham one, the best thing was for Birmingham to send a representative to Parliament in despite of Parliament; accordingly Sir Charles Wolseley[1] was proposed to the meeting as a most eligible person for such a position, and was elected by the meeting "amid the thundering acclamations of one undivided multitude," to be "Legislatorial Attorney" and representative of the people of Birmingham in Parliament for one year, "if so long he executed his trust faithfully;" and he was charged to present himself at the bar of the House of Commons, and to claim admission.

Edmunds, in the course of his speech, is reported to have said:[2] "It was asked of what use could any one man be in the House of Commons, five hundred of the seats of which are articles of purchase, and always go to the best bidder; in which it has been allowed that the sale of seats is as notorious as the sun at noonday? Of what use would one man be in a House that treated with contempt the prayers of a million of men, no doubt expressing the sentiments of other millions when they prayed for reform? What would be the power of one man among a body of oligarchs, who, in spite of the prayers of an undoubted majority, passed the Corn Bill (of 1815), or among the tyrants who dared to suspend the Habeas Corpus Act? The effect to be produced is not in the House, but upon the country and upon public opinion. The claim of the people of Birmingham is founded upon the same principle as that of the people of England. It is, therefore, one of the means of advancing the general cause. It is very difficult for people to reason upon abstract questions. The present

[1] He was unable to be present, owing to the death of his mother.

[2] *State Trials*, New Series, vol. i. p. 794.

proceeding supplies a fact. We have been long talking about the right of the people to representation. We are now about to exercise the right. This is doing something, and something which, from its novelty, as well as its justice, will excite a very general sensation throughout the country. Every one must allow that something ought to be done. Look into the cause of those distresses which universally prevail, and we shall find that it arises from the bad state of the representative organ of the Legislature."

Maddocks also spoke, and is reported to have said: "I consider, that as the source of all our calamities, and, in a considerable degree, the calamities of a great part of the world, lies in the corrupt state of the representation of the people of England in Parliament, every Englishman who deserves the name ought to join heart and hand in laying open and exposing to the world those base and infamous transactions of the Honourable House through which Englishmen have been treated no better than the slaves of the despot of Spain or those of the Dey of Algiers."[1]

Some resolutions were duly passed, and the meeting dispersed, no disorder or breach of the peace having occurred.

The idea of sending a representative to Parliament in this manner was absurd, and in itself a proof of the ignorance of those who originated it, but it showed conclusively the hopelessness of the people as to obtaining Parliamentary reform from Parliament itself, and their abiding faith in the efficacy of Parliamentary reform for the alleviation of their ills.

Foiled at every turn in their effort for reform, receiving stripes and punishment whenever the law

[1] *State Trials*, New Series, vol. i. p. 795.

could be brought into operation against them, sunk in misery, and poverty, and hardships, and starvation, groaning under the infamous injustice of the existing state of things, and convinced that in reform lay their only hope of safety, one cannot, I think, hold the people in any way morally blamable for their agitation.

From Birmingham we may follow the agitation to London. Here, on the 21st July, a meeting was held at Smithfield. Hunt arrived about one o'clock and ascended a waggon, from which he spoke. It was said that 70,000 persons were present. He wound up his speech by saying "He was sure it was not necessary for him to request them to suffer nothing to instigate them to acts of riot; what they wanted was not devastation, but the recovery of their rights." Certain resolutions were then read and carried; the first declared the inherent right of every man to be free. The succeeding ones contained propositions founded upon the principle of every man being entitled to a voice in the election of representatives who made the laws, and that no man ought to be taxed without his previous participation in that right. They declared that the members of the present House of Commons were not in such manner justly elected; that after the 1st January 1820 they could not consider themselves conscientiously bound by any enactments made by persons who did not represent them; that with a view to accelerate the choice of just representatives, books should be opened for the enrolment of every man of mature age, and sound mind, so as to enable him to give his vote when required to do so, and that an humble address should be presented to the Prince Regent, requesting him to issue his writs to the returning officers of the Empire, to cause representatives to be chosen agreeably to these resolutions. A

resolution was also passed in favour of Catholic emancipation, and another disclaiming the National Debt.

As if with the distinct object of provoking a riot, the authorities arrested the Reverend Mr. Harrison while the meeting was proceeding. He was with Hunt on the waggon, which was used as a platform, and was to have spoken; but as he at once surrendered himself, and as the people were urgently counselled to preserve quiet, no riot ensued. After this interruption, Hunt read a letter from Lord Sidmouth, stating that he declined to present to the Regent two Remonstrances which had been voted—one at a meeting in Westminster, and another at Manchester. A resolution was thereupon proposed and passed: "That this meeting, jealous of the right they possess of addressing by Petition, Memorial, or Remonstrance, the highest authority of the Government, with feelings of indignation towards any individual that presumes to stand in the way of this right, publicly censure the conduct of Lord Sidmouth for having dared to withhold Petitions and Remonstrances from the Prince Regent."

One other little incident is worth noticing in connection with this meeting. "A Mr. Gast, a ship carpenter from Deptford, addressed the meeting. He refuted the calumny (advanced in the House of Commons) that the lower orders were too ignorant to understand the mysteries of Government. The lower orders of society were more wise in the regulation of their private affairs than Ministers were in the regulation of the affairs of the public."

On the 28th July a meeting was held at Stockport.[1] Some 4000 to 5000 persons were present. "Most of the men had large sticks, which appeared to have been

[1] See *Annual Register*, 1820, p. 908, etc.

"newly cut from the hedges. Several persons were on the scaffold." There were flags—one of them surmounted by a cap of Liberty—with the mottoes of "Universal Suffrage," "Annual Parliaments," "Election by Ballot," "No Corn Laws." It was, unfortunately, not as peaceable a meeting as usual, for a constable was severely maltreated; in fact, nearly killed by some persons in the crowd.

The chair was taken by Sir Charles Wolseley, the "Legislatorial Attorney for Birmingham," who made a speech. He said "He was a most determined friend of the people, and should remain so while there was a drop of blood in his heart. . . . He was proud to say that he had been at the taking of the Bastile in France, and would be happy to be at the taking of a Bastile in England. Were all hearts but as firm in the cause as his own, they would soon put an end to the present tyranny and corruption. They should be firm and united, for in a few weeks the struggle would be made and ended."[1]

Harrison, whose arrest has just been recorded, but who had since been released, also spoke, and was reported to have said: "The House of Commons were the people's servants. It was as absurd to petition them as it would be for a master to petition his groom for his horse. . . . There was a barrier between the throne and the people which must be removed either by force from heaven or hell, in order that they might see whether a man or a pig was upon the throne. . . . The united will of the people was sure to prevail. It was an axiom that could not be confuted."[1] Several resolutions were passed, one of which was that Lord Sidmouth had been guilty of high treason. Both Sir C. Wolseley and

[1] These sentences are quoted because they were those selected afterwards as the grounds of a prosecution against both the speakers.

Harrison were subsequently prosecuted for these speeches, and the prosecution is specially notable as affording a very early if not quite the first instance of the use of the word "platform" as applied to the place from which speeches were made. The *Annual Register* (1820, p. 909) reports the Crown prosecutor as saying, "At a particular house a *platform* had been erected upon which the leaders mounted." From this use of the word, the transition to calling the speeches Platform speeches was quite obvious and natural.

Meetings followed meetings quickly enough now, and the Government thought it desirable to make a move. Accordingly, on the 30th of July 1819, the Regent issued a proclamation.[1]

"Whereas in divers parts of Great Britain meetings of large numbers of his Majesty's subjects have been held upon the requisition of persons who have, by seditious and treasonable speeches addressed to the persons assembled, endeavoured to bring into hatred and contempt the Government and Constitution established in this realm, and particularly the Commons House of Parliament, and to excite disobedience to the laws, and insurrection against his Majesty's authority; and whereas at one of such meetings (Birmingham) the persons there assembled, in gross violation of the law, did, as much as in them lay, nominate a person, to sit in their name and on their behalf in the Commons House of Parliament," the people were solemnly warned against every attempt to overthrow the law, and all magistrates, etc., were charged to use their best endeavour to bring to justice all persons "who had been or may be guilty of uttering seditious speeches and harangues."

[1] *Annual Register*, 1819, pp. 123, 124.

Proclamations do not make a law; this one had little effect, and there was no cessation of meetings. On the 31st of July there was a meeting at Huddersfield. It was addressed by a shoemaker and a weaver —into such hands had the political guidance of the people come, owing to the neglect of the higher or better educated classes, and their refusal to give the people their assistance, protection, or advice. Resolutions were passed recommending that the example of Birmingham should be followed. On the 3d of August a meeting was held at Birmingham in favour of reform, and it was resolved by some of the reformers that they should form themselves into a society to be called "the Birmingham Union." At a meeting at Leigh, near Manchester, a few days later there was "a great concourse of the lower order of people"; and the authorities again apparently deliberately attempted to provoke a riot by arresting a man who was on the Platform, whilst the meeting was in full swing. The people, however, were irritatingly quiet and peaceable; "the officers took their man without opposition," as reported an eye-witness.[1] Indeed, all the meetings except that at Stockport passed over without any disturbance or violence, and afforded the Government no justification on that ground for again suppressing the right of meeting.

At last, however, the authorities succeeded in their oft-repeated attempts at provoking a disturbance, and so well contrived and carried out was their action that disturbance was inevitable. This was at the historic meeting at Manchester, celebrated ever after under the name of Peterloo.

Early in August the Manchester reformers deter-

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 251.

mined to follow the example of Birmingham in electing a representative, and they issued a notice of a meeting to be holden for that purpose; but as the meeting was for an illegal purpose, it was prohibited by the local authorities—the magistrates—and the design was relinquished.

Shortly after, however, the reformers advertised a meeting for the 16th of August for an object the legality of which was fully acknowledged—namely, "To consider the propriety of adopting the most legal and effectual means of obtaining a reform in the Commons House of Parliament,"—and they invited Hunt to come down and speak at it.

The meeting was attended by large numbers of persons from Rochdale, Stockport, Oldham, and other neighbouring places, as well as by the Manchester people, and among those present were many women and children. No arms were carried, and the demeanour of all was peaceable and orderly. From eleven to one o'clock various columns, some of them several thousands strong, arrived, marching in regular files of three or four deep, with conductors, bands, and flags; a blue flag, in silk, with inscriptions in golden letters—"Unity and Strength," "Liberty and Fraternity"; a green one, also in silk, with golden letters—"Parliaments Annual," "Suffrage Universal." Others with various other mottoes—"No Corn Laws," "Let us die like men and not be sold like slaves." There appeared also, borne on a staff, "a Cap of Liberty,"—a handsome cap of crimson velvet, with a tuft of laurel, tastefully braided with the word "Liberty" in front; also among the number of flags an ensign with a bloody pike on it; and another, a black one, with the words "Equal representation or death." About 60,000 to 80,000 persons had assembled

when Hunt, who was to preside, arrived. As soon as he could secure silence he began making a speech.

He referred to their previous meeting having been prevented, and said, "That those who had attempted to put it down by the most malignant exertions had occasioned them to meet that day in more than twofold numbers." He spoke a few sentences more. Then, as described by an eye-witness,[1] "At this stage of the business the Yeomanry cavalry were seen advancing in a rapid trot to the area; their ranks were in disorder, and on arriving within it, they halted to breathe their horses and to recover their ranks. . . . After a moment's pause the cavalry drew their swords, and brandished them fiercely in the air; upon which Hunt and Johnson desired the multitude to give three cheers, to show the military that they were not to be daunted in the discharge of their duty by their unwelcome presence. This they did, upon which Mr. Hunt again proceeded (with his speech): 'This was a mere trick,' he said, 'to interrupt the proceedings of the meeting, but he trusted that they would all stand firm.' He had scarcely said these words, before the Manchester Yeomanry cavalry rode into the mob, which gave way before them, and directed their course to the cart from which Hunt was speaking. Not a brickbat was thrown at them, not a pistol was fired during this period. All was quiet and orderly, as if the cavalry had been the friends of the multitude, and had marched as such into the midst of them. . . . Hunt and Johnson were forthwith arrested under warrants issued by the magistrates who were

[1] I have taken this account from *The Times* of the 19th August, which is the fairest and most graphic account available. The writer of it was present on the Platform or hustings, and he was arrested with "the reformers" by the police. For some further and most interesting details which show how completely the authorities were in the wrong, and how brazenly false was the account given by their friends, see *The Times* of 26th August, p. 2.

sitting in a house close by. As soon as Hunt and Johnson had jumped from the waggon, a cry was made by the cavalry, 'Have at their flags!' In consequence, they immediately dashed not only at the flags which were in the waggon, but those which were posted among the crowd, cutting most indiscriminately to the right and to the left, in order to get at them. This set the people running in all directions, and it was not until this act had been committed that any brickbats were hurled at the military. From that moment the Manchester Yeomanry cavalry lost all command of temper."

Bamford,[1] who was also present, but in a different part of the meeting, has thus described the occurrence: "On the cavalry drawing up they were received with a shout of goodwill, as I understood it. They shouted again, waving their sabres over their heads; and then, slackening rein, and striking spur into their steeds, they dashed forward and began cutting the people. 'Stand fast,' I said; 'they are riding upon us; stand fast;' and there was a general cry in our quarter of 'Stand fast.' The cavalry were in confusion; they evidently could not, with all the weight of man and horse, penetrate that compact mass of human beings; and their sabres were plied to hew a way through naked held-up hands and defenceless heads; and then chopped limbs and wound-gaping skulls were seen, and groans and cries were mingled with the din of that horrid confusion. 'Ah, ah!' 'For shame!' 'for shame!' was shouted. Then 'Break, break; they are killing them in front, and they cannot get away;' and there was a general cry of 'Break, break! For a moment the crowd held back, as in a pause, then was a rush, heavy and resistless as a headlong sea, and a sound like low thunder, with screams, prayers, and impre-

[1] Bamford, vol. i. p. 206.

"cations from the crowd-moiled, and sabre-doomed who could not escape. . . . On the breaking of the crowd, the Yeomanry wheeled; and dashing wherever there was an opening, they followed, pressing and wounding. In ten minutes from the commencement of the havoc, the field was an open and almost deserted space. The sun looked down through a sultry and motionless air. The curtains and blinds of the windows within view were all closed. A gentleman or two might occasionally be seen looking out from one of the new houses before mentioned, near the door of which a group of persons (special constables) were collected, apparently in conversation; others were assisting the wounded or carrying off the dead. The hustings remained with a few broken and hewed flag-staves erect, and a torn and gashed banner or two drooping; whilst over the whole field were strewed, caps, bonnets, hats, shawls, and other parts of male and female dress, trampled, torn, and bloody. The Yeomanry had dismounted; some were easing their horses' girths; others adjusting their accoutrements; and some were wiping their sabres. Several mounds of human beings still remained where they had fallen, crushed down, and smothered; some were still groaning; others, with staring eyes, were gasping for breath; and others would never breathe more."

Subsequent accounts showed that eleven people were killed, over 500 wounded, of whom about 140 were wounded by sabres.[1]

Great was the excitement caused throughout the country by this unfortunate affair; bitter was the wrath and indignation of the masses of the people. The meeting had been announced for several days before it was held; it was admittedly for a legal object; no disturbance

[1] See Prentice's *Manchester*, p. 167.

of any kind had been caused by the people, not an illegal word had been spoken, not a vestige of provocation had been given, when suddenly the Yeomanry, without even the slightest notice, with no public reading of the Riot Act, charged the defenceless crowd of men, women, and children, sabring them right and left. The public wrath was, if possible, intensified when, almost as fast as the mail coach could reach London and come back again, a letter came from Lord Sidmouth,[1] expressing to the magistrates the "great satisfaction derived by his Royal Highness (the Prince Regent) from their prompt, decisive, and efficient measures for the preservation of the public tranquillity," and to the military authorities, "his high approbation" of the services of the military on the occasion.

But this outrage on public liberty was too serious and too tragic, too iniquitous to be disposed of by the "great satisfaction" even of the Prince Regent and his Ministers. A more unprovoked and brutal attack on an unarmed and orderly assembly had never been committed in the whole course of the history of the country, and the people, justly incensed by the conduct of the authorities, had instant recourse to the Platform for the expression of their feelings.

"Eleven persons killed, 600 wounded, 60,000 carrying to their homes the recollections of that fatal day; poverty and misery in every cottage; deep distress, attributable not unjustly to heavy taxation and a law prohibiting the importation of food. Was there no wild

[1] The letter was dated 21st August, or five days after the outrage, and it "was sanctioned by a Cabinet Council," whose members could not possibly have known the rights or wrongs of the occurrence. Still less could the Regent have known anything about it when he expressed his approval, as he was away at Christchurch yachting. His secretary's letter conveying his approval to Lord Sidmouth is dated 19th August—"*Royal George Yacht* off Christchurch,"—just three days after the sad event.

"revenge for the injuries inflicted? no vengeance on the instruments of an iron-handed Government? no retaliation with the dagger for the cruel and wanton assault by the sword? There was not. The population of Lancashire had faith in the just administration of the law. Its working men, rough in manner and rude in speech, but shrewd, intelligent, and possessing much of the generous qualities of the Anglo-Saxon race, would not stoop to cowardly assassination. They had faith in their principles and greater belief in moral than physical force. . . . The men of Lancashire would not seek reform through the horrors of a sanguinary revolution."[1]

A few days after the "massacre," as it was called, a meeting took place near Huddersfield, one of several. A description of it is given in a letter, dated 20th August, from certain magistrates there to Lord Fitzwilliam, the Lord Lieutenant of the West Riding of the county. "About seven o'clock last evening a large multitude of people were suddenly assembled within half a mile of the town, to the number of about 3000. A person from Manchester related to them what had taken place there, and concluded by telling them that now was the time to be revenged. Another person then said, that all who were willing to support the cause of radical reform by force, should signify the same in the usual way, which was answered by a tremendous shout from the multitude. He then informed them that a meeting would be held the next night at Fixby. 'With arms?' was asked by the multitude. He said: 'We will not say with arms; but all persons are requested to provide themselves with such things as may in any way whatever be useful to them.'"[2]

Special constables were sworn in the next day by

[1] Prentice's *Manchester*, p. 168. [2] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 271.

the magistrates to preserve the peace in the evening. On Saturday the magistrates added a P.S. to their letter, and this is a strange and suggestive part of the story: "The night has passed over quietly. Numbers were seen returning to their homes late at night, most probably deterred from meeting by the precautions taken, and by a report circulated among the people, that the man who addressed them from Manchester was a spy."

In London little time was lost before some of the reformers met (on the 21st) at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, and passed a series of indignant resolutions, and invited London and Westminster to hold public meetings to consider of the affair at Manchester.

The Platform alone could suffice for the expression of their feelings in such a crisis; and a similar invitation was sent to Westminster by Sir F. Burdett, who gave some vent to his wrath in a letter, dated 22d August, to his constituents: "On reading the newspapers this morning I was filled with shame, grief, and indignation, at the account of the blood spilled at Manchester. This then is the answer of the boroughmongers to the petitioning people; this is the practical proof of our standing in no need of reform; these the practical blessings of our glorious boroughmonger domination; this the use of a standing army in time of peace."[1] He called on the gentlemen of England "to join the general voice, loudly demanding justice and redress, and head public meetings throughout the United Kingdom to put a stop in its commencement to a reign of terror and of blood, to afford consolation, as far as it can be afforded, and legal redress to the widows and orphans and mutilated victims of this unparalleled

[1] See *State Trials*, New Series, vol. i. p. 5.

"and barbarous outrage. For this purpose I propose that a meeting should be called in Westminster."[1] Accordingly, on the 2d September, a meeting was held at Palace Yard, Westminster—15,000 to 50,000 persons, according to various estimates, being at it. Sir F. Burdett presided, and spoke, also Mr. Hobhouse. Sir F. Burdett said: "The question now was as to the paramount and imprescriptible right of the people of England to meet and express their opinions upon the political state of the country. . . . I hold that to be a right not only to Englishmen but one inherent in man—one antecedent to all political institutions, and of which no political institution can justly deprive mankind. . . .

"The time has now come when from one end of the country to the other the people should come forward, and with one voice call for a change of Ministers against the men who have thus countenanced the shedding of blood." Several resolutions were passed, among them one, "That the atrocious outrage on the defenceless and peaceable people against all law, and in defiance of justice, is an attempt to destroy by the sword all the yet remaining liberties of Englishmen"; another urging the old thing—the necessity of Parliamentary reform; and others calling for redress for those who were injured at Manchester.

This was but the beginning of the storm which was to blow about ministerial and royal ears. On the 13th September the greatest public reception ever given to a private individual was accorded to Hunt in London. After his arrest in Manchester, where nothing less than a charge of high treason would satisfy the vindictiveness

[1] In March 1820 this letter was made the subject of an indictment against Sir F. Burdett for seditious libel, and he was convicted and sentenced to three months' imprisonment and £2000 fine.—See *State Trials*, New Series, vol. i.

of the authorities, it was discovered that such a charge was quite unsustainable. They had, therefore, to content themselves with charging him with the minor offences of unlawful assembling, and seditious conspiracy, and he had been committed for trial, but had been released on bail, and now came to London.

Tens, it is not an exaggeration to say hundreds, of thousands went out to meet him. A great procession was formed. His progress through the streets was more enthusiastic than any royal progress in all the annals of history had ever been. The *Times*[1] estimated the number of the crowds through which he passed, or by whom he was accompanied, as 300,000, excluding the spectators in the houses. Arrived at his destination, he made a short speech. "He congratulated them upon the state of the cause of reform which had been advanced more by the conduct of the Manchester magistrates, and the cowardly Manchester Yeomanry, than it would have been by the exertions of the people for years. He urged them strongly to preserve order, and not to give their enemies an opportunity of calumniating them." A great banquet followed in the evening, and Hunt spoke twice. "He called on all classes of reformers to bury in oblivion their former causes of disagreement, and to join hand and heart in the great object of reform.

"Every man of common sense knew that no party in the State could do anything without the assistance of the people, and that the people were now too sensible of their rights to be led by the nose by the sophistical declamation of interested individuals." He then gave a toast: "The only source of all legitimate power = the people." The demonstration from beginning to end

[1] *The Times*, 14th September 1819.

was a great success, and was notable evidence of the growing power of the people and of the direction in which their views and sympathies were running.

Two days before this—namely, on the 11th of September—the Common Council of London met and passed resolutions, the principal one directing that an address should be presented to the Prince Regent, praying him "To institute an immediate and effectual inquiry into the outrages that have been committed, and to cause the guilty perpetrators thereof to be brought to signal and condign punishment." In obedience to this resolution the Lord Mayor, sheriffs, etc., and about fifty members of the Common Council, on the 17th September, presented the Address to the Prince Regent on his throne, surrounded by the Duke of Wellington, Lords Liverpool, Sidmouth, and Castlereagh.

The Prince Regent's reply was curt and hostile, devoid of any vestige of sympathy, or of any trace of regret for the unfortunate people who had lost their lives or been injured at Manchester. "I receive with feelings of deep regret the Address and Petition," said the Regent; and he then proceeded to tell them "they were unacquainted with the circumstances and incorrectly informed; that if the laws were really violated on that occasion, the ordinary tribunals of the country were open for redress, and that no inquiry could be instituted." The reply came but badly from men who must of necessity themselves have been "unacquainted with the circumstances and incorrectly informed" when they penned their letter of approbation and "great satisfaction" to the magistrates.

The people, however, were too wroth to be deterred by any expressions of royal displeasure, and meeting followed meeting.

On the 20th September a large meeting was held at York, presided over by the Lord Mayor, and a procession of some 4000 to 5000 people paraded the streets previously with banners and music. The Recorder of Doncaster spoke at it. He claimed that the right of the people publicly to discuss State grievances, and to Petition, was to be exercised at the pleasure of the people themselves, unrestrained so long as disorder or excess was not committed by them; he declared the Ministers unworthy of confidence; he expressed his conviction that the call for reform was neither local nor temporary, that no Ministers could extinguish it. Two and a half years ago meetings similar to these now held took place. The Habeas Corpus Act was suspended, several hundred persons were imprisoned, a momentary check of public declarations followed, but was the principle checked? By no means. It was invigorated, and thus was enabled to break out again. One of the members for the city of York also spoke, and one of the candidates at the last election; several resolutions were passed condemnatory of the proceedings at Manchester, and the meeting peaceably dispersed.

On the same day a great meeting was held at Hunslet Moor; there was a large procession with banners, and "every one wore some black crape or ribbon as a token of mourning for the recent calamities at Manchester." Mr. Mason spoke. He argued on the necessity of a radical reform. "How were they to destroy the hydra-corruption? Not by violence and tumult, for these she delights in; here she would be more than a match for you. Not by the sword, for she has legions at command who wield the murderous steel. Let reason, moderation, and justice be your weapons,

"and then she will be foiled, for her myrmidons are unskilled in such modes of warfare."[1]

After several other speeches resolutions were adopted asking for reform, depicting the dreadful misery being endured by the people, asserting their right to meet, and condemning the proceedings of the authorities at Manchester.

The Mayor of Leeds, evidently a pompous, fussy sort of individual, sent a report of this meeting to the Lord Lieutenant of the county, who forwarded it to the Government,[2] which is worth quoting, without comment, needing none. "A man, of the name of Chapman, took the chair; some violent speeches were delivered. . . . The crowd which first appeared on Hunslet Moor must have infinitely surpassed anything of the kind which was ever before known in this place, but being composed of the vile and curious, as well as the mischievous, the former not finding attractions for them, they began, together with the women and children, early to retire."

On the 23d of September a great meeting was held at Birmingham. Sir C. Wolseley, the Legislatorial Attorney, being present, and resolutions were adopted on the subject of "the military violences," and the right of meeting to petition. Among them were the two following: "That our feelings towards the Ministers who have advised the Prince Regent to honour with his thanks the assassins of his people are those of utter abhorrence"[3]—as well they might be. "That one melancholy result of these fatal proceedings has been the loss (on the part of the subjects) of all confidence in the laws of the realm, and the shaking of their allegiance, and that the thanks of the Prince Regent to

[1] *The Examiner*, p. 614.
[2] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli., p. 277.
[3] *The Examiner*, p. 615.

those who have committed an open infraction of the laws, have identified him with those who were guilty of it."

It is impossible here to give details of all the meetings held at this period in connection with the Peterloo massacre. Only a few can be described to illustrate the others, and only sufficient extracts from the speeches and resolutions can be given to show the predominating ideas expressed from the Platform, and the drift or direction of popular opinion.

So far, in this fresh uprising of the Platform, the Whigs and Whig leaders were taking little or no part, and had left the people practically to themselves. Brougham, speaking at a dinner at Kendal, said: "He was no friend to the moving of large bodies of people to attend distant meetings; they should meet at home, and unnecessary assemblages, though not unlawful, were better avoided." They accordingly were avoided by the Whigs, but "the poor manufacturers, and the most enlightened of the middle classes made the whole nation ring with their defiant calls for justice."

During the rest of September several meetings were held in London, Cripplegate Ward, Farringdon, Bishopsgate, and Southwark—all crying out for reform, and censuring the proceedings of the authorities at Manchester and the Government for endorsing and upholding them.

At Nottingham a meeting was held on the 20th September, after a procession with banners and bands, and a cap of liberty; and a couple of days later a meeting was held at Liverpool, Lord Sefton presiding, and an inquiry demanded into the occurrences at Manchester.

October saw no abatement of Platform activity.

On the 1st a large meeting was held at Bramley, near Leeds; on the 4th a meeting at Bristol; on the same day a great meeting of some 40,000 near Halifax. A large procession preceded the meeting, with bands with muffled drums playing the "Dead March in Saul," and "Scots wha hae wi' Wallace bled"; several speeches were made and resolutions passed.

Among the Parliamentary papers presented, and subsequently printed, in order to influence the House,[1] there is a report of this meeting which said: "Every report I receive justifies me in declaring, that more than 50,000 persons were assembled; and that most of them had something on which they relied more than their sticks; some of which were actually shouldered, being rather clubs than sticks." No proof, however, of this allegation was offered, but it was employed by the Government to influence Parliamentary opinion when they came to ask for coercive legislation. Several meetings were held also in Scotland, now awaking from the apathy which has been so well described by Lord Cockburn; but, unfortunately, both in Paisley and Glasgow the meetings resulted in subsequent serious rioting.

On the 13th of October the first regular "county meeting" was held. Cumberland met, and asked for the early meeting of Parliament and an inquiry. Two members of Parliament and Brougham spoke at it. The latter said nothing very noteworthy, but Mr. Curwen, M.P., made a very sensible speech, and whilst censuring the Government, pointed out also the folly of the people in demanding such extreme reforms as Universal Suffrage and Annual Parliaments.

The county meeting, however, which excited the

[1] Hansard's *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 278.

greatest attention throughout the country, and which stung the Government more than any other, was a meeting of "the independent inhabitants of Yorkshire." The requisition to the High Sheriff to convene it was signed by the Duke of Norfolk, Earl Fitzwilliam, Lord Lieutenant of the West Riding of the county, Lord Cowper, Lord Milton, and several other persons of rank and property and position in the county—a different class from those who hitherto had been convening and holding meetings.

The meeting came off on the 14th of October, and was held in the historic Castle Yard of York, the scene of so many meetings in favour of free speech and public discussion. As early as nine in the morning large parties arrived from distant places with bands and banners. About 20,000 persons were present. The High Sheriff took the chair. He said he had called the meeting readily as he was a friend to popular meetings, and thought it was the union, and not the separation of the great and rich from the middling and lower class which would produce peace and happiness.

The Duke of Norfolk addressed the meeting, declaring his sincere attachment to the people's rights, and moved the resolutions. "That it is the undoubted right of the people to hold meetings for the purpose of considering any matters of public interest; that it is a direct violation of the law, and an alarming invasion of the rights of the people to disperse by violence and military force a meeting legally assembled and peaceably held for such purpose; that they had learnt with unfeigned concern that a meeting at Manchester was suddenly attacked and dispersed by military force; that they had seen with surprise and regret that the Regent had been advised by his Ministers to give his royal approba-

"tion to the interference of the military; and they prayed that Parliament might be at once assembled and these matters inquired into."

Other speeches followed which were "characterised by fairness and moderation," the resolutions were adopted, Lord Fitzwilliam, "at the end of the day's business, with a view of all the circumstances of the meeting, proposed the thanks to the Sheriff for assembling it," and the meeting, which had been distinguished by the orderly and peaceable behaviour of the people, dispersed.

Lord Castlereagh subsequently declared, "It was the first county meeting which had been disgraced with all those emblems of flags and drums which had characterised assemblies of a different description."[1]

The presence of the Lieutenant of the County at a public meeting of such a character, and with such an object, was rather much for the Government. Forthwith Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary, wrote to the Prime Minister "to call his attention to the conduct of Lord Fitzwilliam, who in the county under his immediate charge, and in which he represented his Majesty, had thought proper to take the leading part in assembling a meeting of the county, not merely for the purpose of arraigning the conduct of his Majesty's Ministers, but for that also of flying in the face of the admonition from the throne given by the Regent upon receiving the Address of the city of London;"[2] and recommending his instant removal from the Lord-Lieutenancy. Within a week from the meeting Lord Fitzwilliam was informed that the Prince Regent had no further occasion for his

[1] Hansard's *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 103.

[2] See Twiss's *Life of Lord Eldon*, vol. ii. p. 347. See also *Life of Lord Sidmouth*, by Dean Pellew, vol. iii. p. 271—a most one-sided and prejudiced work.

services as Lord Lieutenant of the West Riding of Yorkshire,—was dismissed, in fact, as if he had been a subordinate clerk in a Government department. "This was a necessary act of insulted authority," complacently wrote the autocratic Lord Sidmouth to the Lord Chancellor; but in reality it was an attempt to strike awe into any of the upper classes holding official appointments who might have felt disposed to take part in the agitation against the Government.

All through October meetings went on: Hull, Sheffield, Glasgow, the County Norfolk, the Potteries, Leicester, the County Durham, the County Westmoreland, all added their quota to the volume of indignation against the Government, or to the cry for Parliamentary reform.

At the Westmoreland county meeting Brougham again spoke, and, referring to the absence of the county members from it, he said: "It was the duty of your members to attend this meeting, which had been duly convened by the High Sheriff of this county. They were in the neighbourhood. The first place of a member of Parliament is the hustings; the second his seat in the House of Commons, watching over the interests of his constituents and of the people at large, and they are not worthy of being there if they do not come and meet you here."

November saw no cessation of the meetings. On the 8th of November a large meeting was held at Huddersfield, after a procession, with three bands and forty-four banners, and seven caps of liberty. On the same day 18,000 to 20,000 had a meeting at Wigan, convened by "some low persons of Wigan," as Lord Balcarres wrote to Lord Sidmouth: "The mob carried eighteen flags, with the usual symbols of sedition . . .

"the day passed away with the greatest order and tranquillity."[1]

On the 15th of November a meeting was held at Habergham Eves, near Burnley, "to consider the best means of bringing the instigators and perpetrators of the late Manchester massacre to justice, and to embrace the subject of the necessity of Parliamentary reform."[2]

Placards had been issued that such a meeting was to be held. The magistrates prohibited it, but nevertheless it came off. Bodies of men, to the number of several thousands, many of them carrying sticks, marched with banners and music to the meeting.

"During the meeting a cry was raised that soldiers were coming to disperse it; whereupon many persons drew forth pikeheads which they had concealed, and some began to screw the pikeheads on staves. Some also produced pistols." This happened twice. John Knight presided. He ascended the hustings "with a cap of liberty on his head," and opened the proceedings. To take the description from the speech of Serjeant Scarlett, who afterwards prosecuted him: "Around him were assembled eight or nine thousand persons of the lowest order—I mean low in the point of fortune—persons who are destined to obtain their livelihood by the work of their hands, and therefore, though entitled to all the rights the richest men can claim, yet not entitled by their education to take any part in politics."[3]

Several resolutions were passed. One against the Corn Laws; another in condemnation of the Manchester magistrates; another that they should resist any measures of the Government if they brought in Bills to

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 296.

[2] *State Trials*, vol. i. p. 530, New Series.

[3] *Ibid.*, New Series, p. 537. See Speech of Serjeant Scarlett, counsel for the Crown.

curtail the liberty of meeting to discuss political subjects. Knight said the Ministers were going to pass Bills to prevent such persons as could think and durst speak of their tyranny and oppression; to pass Bills to gag the mouths of such persons. After his speech some resolutions were passed, and he then dissolved the meeting and told the people to go home peaceably and quietly. And they went home peaceably and quietly. Indeed, excepting two or three meetings in Scotland, all these meetings were remarkable for peace and order. There had been no disturbance of any kind by the people. On this score the Government had no excuse for interference. A contemporary writer forcibly and truly pointed this out.

"The meetings now holding in England show that both the numbers and the conduct of these radical reformers raise them far above contempt. We see 40,000 to 50,000 persons assemble at one place without those natural leaders whose presence might be supposed necessary to the preservation of order; they meet under a strong sense of wrongs and insults, yet they conduct their proceedings with a degree of temper and decorum not exceeded in the best ordered societies. . . . We doubt if there is another country in the world where such masses of people could meet without mobbing and outrage; and perhaps the superior intelligence, self-command, and steady conduct of the lower classes of England were never before so strikingly exemplified. As for the strong language they employ, and the unlimited reforms they demand, we consider that they have been provoked into them; and that new plans of coercion will only inflame them to a greater degree of violence."[1]

The Government, however, was alarmed, or professed itself alarmed, at all these meetings, and the condition

[1] See *The Scotsman*, 16th October 1819.

of the country was deemed to necessitate the earlier assembling of Parliament. Accordingly, on the 23d of November, Parliament met. The Regent informed both Houses that "The seditious practices so long prevalent in some of the manufacturing districts of the country have been continued with increased activity since you were last assembled in Parliament. They have led to proceedings incompatible with the public tranquillity, and with the peaceful habits of the industrious classes of the community; and a spirit is now fully manifested utterly hostile to the Constitution of this kingdom, and aiming not only at a change of those political institutions which have hitherto constituted the pride and security of this country, but at the subversion of the rights of property and of all order in society. I have given directions that the necessary information on this subject shall be laid before you, and I feel it to be my indispensable duty to press on your immediate attention the consideration of such measures as may be requisite for the counteraction and suppression of a system which, if not effectually checked, may bring confusion and ruin on the nation."

The first announcement of the Government was that of their determination to refuse the inquiry asked for into the Manchester catastrophe. The question came up in an amendment to the Address moved by Tierney, when 150 voted for the amendment, and 381 against it. During the debate a very interesting episode occurred, in which the rival claims of Parliament and the Platform came into competition. Canning, dealing with the request for the Parliamentary inquiry, did his utmost to disparage the Platform—somewhat ungrateful conduct on his part, as he was very fond of having frequent recourse to it himself for his own purposes.

"Let us," he said, "see on what grounds they had rested this call for Parliamentary inquiry"; and he quoted resolutions passed at a lot of meetings held after that at Manchester on the 16th of August, nearly all affirming the legality of that meeting. "There were abundance of other resolutions affirming the same opinion, with more or less confidence, but he had troubled the House with instances enough to show the general prevalence of the notion that the meeting at Manchester was a legal meeting.[1]

"Now, as these resolutions turned out to have been founded in mistake, was it not to be fairly presumed that the meetings had, under an entire misconception, come to decisions which they themselves would now admit to be no longer maintainable?

"But it was not in matters of law only that the meetings in the country appeared to have been misled. It was impossible to overlook those flagrant misrepresentations of fact by which the public mind had been worked up to a fearful state of irritation. . . . It was alleged that the magistrates of Manchester were necessarily actuated by hostile feelings towards the people, from the circumstances of their being generally 'master-manufacturers.' It had been stated that the sabres of the cavalry were sharpened with a view to the conflict on the 16th of August. 'There was another report—a woman said to have been saved by an officer of dragoons from the barbarous rage of the Yeomanry cavalry.' All these allegations were untrue.

"Deduct, therefore, the amount of the impression made by these and an abundance of other similar fables; deduct the effect of the persuasion that the Manchester meeting was a legal meeting; and then

[1] Hansard, vol. xli. p. 199.

"judge whether public meetings, proceeding to discussion under such influences, could have decided with equity and temper; whether we should not do those meetings the greatest possible injustice if we were to imagine that they would, under better information, persevere in decisions so unfairly and surreptitiously obtained. No, sir; it is not till all the meetings which assembled during the prevalence of these mistakes and delusions shall have re-assembled, and re-resolved all their resolutions with the full knowledge that the Manchester meeting was illegal, that the magistrates were *not* master-manufacturers, that the swords of the Yeomanry were *not* sharpened with a view to the 16th of August, and that the horrible story about the woman and the Yeomanry was not true, that we can have a pretence for granting a Parliamentary inquiry on the ground that the country demands it."

Brougham, in reply, stated that "Some errors and some falsehoods must always appear on questions discussed with so much interest by the people of this country."[1]

Doubtless one of the dangers of the Platform is impulsiveness, and consequently probable error. But if the Platform sinned in this case, the Ministers who accused it sinned far worse.

If the Platform was to be condemned for false statements, what condemnation would Ministers be worthy of if they made inaccurate statements? Should they not have recast their policy, and re-resolved their determinations? The *exposé* of the Ministers was not made until March, when *The Times*[2] wrote an article on the trial of Hunt, Bamford, and others. But that *exposé* was complete: "It is now perfectly clear that every-

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 223.

[2] 30th March 1820.

thing which was stated in the House of Commons respecting the riotous character of the Manchester meeting by Lord Castlereagh, the Solicitor-General, and other honourable members was totally and absolutely false; it was directly opposed to truth; it does not appear to have even had verisimilitude, or probability in its favour. . . .

"If the future student take up Parliamentary history, he will find in the speeches of Ministers readings of Riot Acts — magistrates trampled on — Yeomanry assaulted, hooted, unhorsed—waggon loads of stones—forests of bludgeons—not one tittle of which has any existence or place in the State trial. What will Ministers do? They must either destroy every record of their speeches, or cancel every publication of the late trial, by which all their statements are dissipated and reduced to nothing, or else they will stand recorded for ever as having solemnly averred in the House of Legislature that which was found in a court of justice to be totally untrue."

On the whole, it must, I think, be admitted that the Platform emerged far more creditably out of this contest than did the Ministers.

The demand for the inquiry having been negatived, the Government proceeded to the more serious business suggested in the Regent's speech. The information laid before the House did not, this time, come in a green bag, nor, wonderful to relate, were any Secret Committees asked for. There were, as a matter of fact, no secret proceedings which could have afforded an excuse for following the familiar precedent. Everything the Government could complain of was open and above board, and was visible to all men. The papers on which the Government was going to found an applica-

tion to Parliament for extraordinary powers had accordingly to be presented publicly to Parliament. They consisted mostly of letters from magistrates and others, describing some of these meetings of which I have already given an account. Some of the letters were embellished with innuendoes that the people attending the meetings were all formidably armed, and others of them gave expression to the fears of the writers as to the imminence of revolution. The papers contained further some "examinations," with names attached, stating that illegal drilling was being practised in some districts; also a larger number of similar "examinations" from nameless individuals, such as X.Y. or Y.Z., about pikes, and meant to be suggestive of the whole population being armed and ripe for revolution. For instance, among them was one from P.Q., "upon oath," "That about a fortnight ago he received orders from several persons to make about twenty pikes, but he did not make them, nor does he know the persons who ordered them. That he believes he could have had orders for one hundred pikes if he had chosen to accept the order."[1]

Many of the letters were written in an evident state of panic, and were exaggerated and emotional in expression, and evidently untrustworthy, whilst much of the other information was mere hearsay.

As an instance of panic, the following extract from a letter to Lord Sidmouth may be quoted, dated Manchester, 21st October: "From *every quarter* the universal information and opinion is, that the people are in a great measure *armed*, and are continually, and as quickly as possible, and as extensively arming. It is strongly surmised that pikes have been, and are, sent

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 280.

from Birmingham in boxes; I fear also it is but too true that many hundreds of small-priced pistols have been sold in this town within a very short period, and that the lower classes are purchasing them in great numbers."[1]

These letters, manifestly exaggerated as they were, and these "examinations," utterly untrustworthy and worthless as they were, were nevertheless deemed sufficient ground by the Government to ask for stringent legislation; but much evidence was not required where there was an autocratic Government anxious to maintain the abuses on which it throve, and endeavouring at all costs to stem the tide of popular progress, and a servile mechanical Parliamentary majority with the same interests, and ready to obey all behests.

The Government at once proceeded to the congenial task of introducing the measures they considered requisite to silence public discussion.

The crisis of 1795 had necessitated "two Acts" to meet it. That of 1817 had necessitated "four Acts." The crisis of 1819 was deemed to require "six Acts." Such was the progressive rate of increase of despotism under a Tory Government and an unreformed Parliament.

These "six Acts" were—

(1) An Act to prevent the training of persons to the use of arms, and to the practice of military evolutions and exercise;

(2) An Act to authorise Justices of the Peace, in certain disturbed counties, to seize and detain arms collected or kept for purposes dangerous to the public peace;

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 283.

(3) An Act to prevent delay in the administration of justice in cases of misdemeanour;

(4) An Act for more effectually preventing seditious meetings and assemblies;

(5) An Act for the more effectual prevention and punishment of blasphemous and seditious libels; and

(6) An Act to subject certain publications to the duties of stamps upon newspapers, etc.[1]

With five of these, whose titles sufficiently explain their nature, we need not concern ourselves here, none of them directly affecting the Platform. The remaining one—namely, the Seditious Meetings and Assemblies Prevention Act—was aimed altogether at the Platform, and was by far the most important of this whole code of repressive legislation.

It requires therefore detailed treatment. But before proceeding to the consideration of its provisions, it is desirable to understand clearly what practically was the claim being put forward by the people as to the right of public meeting and Platform discussion—put forward, not in formal words, but in deeds and acts.

The case has been best stated in the contemporary work of an opponent of the popular party—a certain irascible Tory ex-Chief Justice of Ceylon, named Sir C. E. Carrington. He wrote: "A right, it seems, is claimed and exercised by those who style themselves radical reformers, to assemble the people by public notification, upon any public occasion, at any time, in any place, and in any numbers, and to propose such subjects of petition, remonstrance, deliberation, or resolution, to the acclamation and consent of the assemblage thus brought together, as they may think fit. In a country governed by law, with a Representa-

[1] Respectively 60 Geo. III. caps. 1, 2, 4, 6, 8, and 9.

tive Body to watch over the interests of the people, have the demagogues of the present day the right they so loudly assert and so perilously exercise? . . .

"It is said that the people do not, in their modern meetings, mean to petition or to remonstrate either to the Crown, or to Parliament, and that to them consequently the Acts of Parliament regulating that right are inapplicable. Petition and remonstrance are presumed by the agitators of the present day to be unavailing, and it is asserted that it is the birthright of the subjects of Great Britain to assemble at the requisition of any private individual, to take into public consideration or discussion any public topic; and to collect and promulge the sense of the meeting, in the shape of resolutions, addresses, or appeals to the people at large.

"This right, exercised as it has been, I deny. The right itself of petition to the Legislature can, we have seen, be exercised only under the observance of certain forms. And shall a much wider range of public convocation and public discussion, unauthorised by any recognised authority, be set loose from all forms, and permitted to invoke, not the Crown, not either House of Parliament, in the respectful tone of petition or complaint, but to breathe the language of censure, of defiance, and contempt, not of men or of measures only, but of the Constitution itself, and to conjure up the spirits of the mob by the unhallowed incantations of every self-elected demagogue?

"The radical reformers summon the people to meet as a *deliberative* assembly to express their decision on public measures, their resolutions on subjects of assumed right, or of political expediency; they thunder from their hustings their frantic anathemas against the present order of things; they issue their fiat for a change, and

"range the votes and acclamations of their votaries in array against the ancient and legitimate authorities of the country, and against the Constitution itself; . . . they resort to a code of abstract rights, created and defined by themselves, and, as they contend, imprescriptible, unalienable, to be denied or impeded only by slaves and tyrants. . . . What! is our Constitution, the labour and the pride of ages, so vitally unsound as to cherish and organise, and keep in perpetual action, within itself, the elements of its own destruction? . . . Does the Legislature admit and sanction an extraneous, appellate jurisdiction, to correct, control, or vituperate its measures, and to deny its authority in public assemblies, called for that purpose at the pleasure of every popular declaimer? I trust that the Constitution of this mighty kingdom is not thus impeachable of folly.

"The convocation by any private individual of a public assembly, unlimited in point of numbers, to deliberate on public measures, and redress of grievances, real or pretended, is illegal." [1]

Thistlewood, looking at the question from diametrically the opposite side, had stated in a document which he had published, "That he knew of no law that could prevent 1000, 10,000, 100,000, or even 1,000,000 of persons from assembling, and no magistrate could touch them till they struck some blow, and that it made no difference whether they met with or without arms, with or without flags, etc." [2]

Lord Sidmouth, the Home Secretary, speaking as a member of the Government, acknowledged that, "As the law now stood, any individual might issue his

[1] See "An Inquiry into the Law Relative to Public Assemblies of the People," by Sir C. E. Carrington, London, 1819.

[2] See Lord Castlereagh's speech, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 384.

mandate to bring together all the idle and curious part of the population of the country at any time, or in any place he pleased. The persons who called these meetings considered themselves empowered (whether legally or not was not at present the question) to attend them with martial music, flags, and banners." [1]

This, in reality, was the point of the matter. That the people, regardless of the old set forms of county meetings or borough meetings, of requisitions and convenings by the High Sheriff or other notable, should meet where, when, and how they pleased, and should discuss what they liked, and say what they liked, and set themselves up as critics of Government, was more than could be borne, at least at that time. The fury of the Government was unbounded. Criticism from the Platform had been at all times hard to bear, even when it was restricted to that very limited class, the "freeholders"; but when the Platform had reached a lower strata of society, which set itself up as having an interest, a share, a stake in the country, and therefore as entitled to the rights of free men and citizens, and when Tory privileges and emoluments and monopolies were endangered, Tory pride blazed up, and the movement must be crushed.

Lord Castlereagh declared that the meetings were tumultuous (though the only tumult in England had been caused by the representatives of the Government themselves at Manchester dispersing a "peaceable and orderly" meeting), that they were quite an innovation upon all the habits, customs, and prejudices of the country, that they were borrowed from the worst days of France, and had conduced most essentially to the progress of the Revolution in that country.[2]

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli.p. 345. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 383.

It is, however, not from a speech in any of the debates on the subject, but from one delivered soon after, on an occasion when free rein was given to language, that the views of the Government are best seen. Canning delivered himself of a Platform oration at Liverpool early in the next year, and said:[1] "A certain number of ambulatory tribunes of the people, self-elected to that high function, assumed the name and authority of whatever place they thought proper to select for a place of meeting; their rostrum was pitched, sometimes here, sometimes there, according to the fancy of the mob, or the patience of the magistrates; but the proposition and the proposer were in all places nearly alike; and when, by a sort of political ventriloquism, the same voice had been made to issue from half a dozen different corners of the country, it was impudently assumed to be a concord of sweet sounds, composing the united voice of the people of England. . . .

"It is no part of the contrivance of the laws that immense multitudes should wantonly be brought together, month after month, and day after day, in places where the very bringing together of a multitude is of itself the source of terror and of danger. It is no part of the provision of the laws, nor is it in the spirit of them, that such multitudes should be brought together at the will of unauthorised and irresponsible individuals, changing the scene of the meeting as may suit their caprice or convenience, and fixing it where they have neither property, nor domicile, nor connection. . . . It is not in consonance but in contradiction to the spirit of the law that such meetings have been holden. The law prescribes a corporate character. The callers

[1] Therry's *Canning*, vol. vi. p. 369.

of these meetings have always studiously avoided it. No summons of freeholders, none of freemen, none of the inhabitants of particular places or parishes, no acknowledgment of local or political classification. . . .

"To bring together the inhabitants of a particular division, or men sharing a common franchise, is to bring together an assembly, of which the component parts act with some respect and awe of each other. Ancient habits, preconceived attachments, that mutual respect which makes the eye of a neighbour a security for each man's good conduct—all these things make men difficult to be moved, on the sudden, to any extravagant and violent enterprise. But bring together a multitude of individuals, having no permanent relation to each other, no common tie, but what arises from their concurrence as members of that meeting, a tie dissolved as soon as the meeting is at an end,—in such an aggregation of individuals there is no such mutual respect, no such check upon the proceedings of each man from the awe of his neighbour's disapprobation; and if ever a multitudinous assembly can be wrought up to purposes of mischief, it will be an assembly so composed.[1]

"How monstrous is it to confound such meetings with the genuine and recognised modes of collecting the sense of the English people! Was it by meetings such as these that the Revolution was brought about? Was it by meetings in St. George's Fields? in Spa Fields? in Smithfield? Was it by untold multitudes collected in a village in the north? No! it was by the meeting of corporations, in their corporate capacity; by the assembly of recognised bodies of the State; by the interchange of opinions among portions of the com-

[1] Therry's *Canning*, vol. vi. p. 378.

"munity known to each other, and capable of estimating each other's views and characters. . . .

"I have always heard that British liberty was established long before the commencement of the late reign;[1] nay, that in the late reign, according to popular politicians, it rather sunk and retrograded; and yet, never till that reign was such an abuse of popular meetings dreamt of, much less erected into a right, not to be questioned by magistrates, and not to be controlled by Parliament."

From speeches in both Houses of Parliament, it appears that other speakers shared these views, expressing at the same time alarm.

Plunket said: "If bodies of the people not convened by any public functionary, but called together by mountebanks whose only title was their impudence and folly, were entitled to assemble in tens of thousands; to march with banners displayed, in military array, into the hearts of populous cities; and if the laws were not competent to assure the people of this country against the panic and dismay excited by such proceedings, there was an end of the Constitution."[2]

One member of the House of Commons "appealed to the common sense of every man who heard him, whether the expression of the public voice was possible to be obtained at these screaming, howling, hallooing meetings. Could any discussion, any deliberation, any fair impartial decision, result from such assemblages?"

One member of the House of Lords—his name is best left in oblivion—said, "He did not think these meetings could be called meetings of the people of England. He considered them altogether as a wretched babel, as a set

[1] The reign of George III. The speech was made shortly after that sovereign's death.

[2] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 131.

of vagabonds. It would, indeed, be the prostitution of language to characterise such wretches as the people of England. . . . The meetings were calculated to sap the spirit of loyalty, of morality, and of religion, and altogether to subvert our laws and our liberties."

The Whig leaders even joined in condemning them. Even Lord Erskine, in the preface to his pamphlet, "The Defences of the Whigs," wrote: "But holding sacred as I do the never-to-be-surrendered privilege of British subjects to assemble peaceably to express to each other, and to the Government of the country, their opinions and complaints, yet I feel no difficulty in saying that nothing can be more obviously useless and mischievous than the assembling of immense multitudes, not in their own communities or neigbourhood, but moving upon other thronged and agitated districts. Such meetings, however legal they may be, cannot but be dangerous to the industrious poor, collected at a distance from their own homes, only to disturb the industry of others, aggravating the sufferings of poverty by the interruption of employment, by the hazard of fatal accidents, and the probable temptation to crimes."

Some additional light is thrown on the views prevailing at this time in the official or governmental spheres by the speech of Mr. Scarlett,[1] when conducting the prosecution of Henry Hunt for attending the Manchester meeting. He said:[2] "It is undoubtedly the privilege of the people of England, stating the proposition broadly, and in an unqualified manner, to meet to consider of public grievances, and to seek the lawful means of redress. But the meetings of that description known to the Constitution, and known to the practice of former ages, have been meetings either of counties or of

[1] Afterwards Lord Chief Baron. [2] *State Trials*, vol. i. p. 180, New Series.

"towns, of corporations, of particular districts, or of particular classes of individuals united by one common interest in the pursuit of one common object. . . . But I never heard it yet stated by any lawyer, and I trust I shall never hear it decided by any judge, that it is a part, or ever was a part, of the law and constitution of this land that any individuals, be they who they may, should have a right to assemble all the people of England in one place, there to discuss public grievances or the nature of the Constitution, and to come to resolutions for the purpose of obtaining redress or alteration.

"I will tell you, shortly and plainly, why that never can be the law of any country. No man can deny that the great physical force of every community lies in the mass of the people when assembled. Those who maintain the most popular principles of government and constitutional law, and who admit or contend that all power and all right are derived from resolutions of the people at large, they, above all others, must be obliged to contend that when people do assemble in a mass, supposing all ranks and all degrees, and all numbers were to be assembled in one vast plain—must also admit as a consequence that when people are so assembled, all the constitutional powers they had before devolved upon the functionaries established by themselves must for the moment cease, and be resolved into the original mass; . . . the people must then resume their original functions, and the Government would be dissolved. Hence it follows, beyond all contradiction, that vast masses of persons assembling under no specific character, under no constituted authority, not called by any public functionary, but upon their own individual free-will and choice, or by the call of some demagogue,

who may exercise a temporary influence over their minds, but has no right to exercise an influence over their actions, connected with no particular trade, affected by no peculiar interest, but taking into their most comprehensive scope all the great principles that support the fabric of the Constitution, that persons so assembled, by such means, and with such objects, never can be a lawful assembly, by the constitution and law of any country on the face of the earth" (Athens perhaps excepted).

But Crown officials and others might argue as much as they liked about the rights or wrongs of the people meeting; or they might put any theoretic interpretation that suited their fancy on that ever-changing entity, the "Constitution."

The fact was, and it was a more powerful fact than all the arguments that were used, the country was outgrowing its swaddling clothes of county meetings and borough meetings and sheriff-convened meetings, and would no longer consent to be bound by them. The time-honoured formula of "The nobility, gentry, clergy, and freeholders" had ceased to be comprehensive enough.

The Government, totally regardless of all considerations but what affected themselves, resolved to suppress the Platform. Said that arch-despot, Lord Sidmouth: "Conciliation had been recommended, and it was the most ardent wish of his Majesty's Ministers to resort to measures which were truly conciliatory. . . . But to hold out a disposition to blend conciliation with concession was a course to which he could not agree, for it was one fraught with danger. But what had they to concede? Did they not possess the Constitution they had received from their ancestors? That

"Constitution was now in greater danger than it had ever been at any time since the accession of the House of Brunswick to the throne, and he therefore called on their Lordships to rally round it. He called upon the noble Lords opposite to give their aid, to assist in defeating the common enemy that threatened the subversion of the Constitution and everything valuable in the existing order of Society. Let them go hand and hand in this great object."[1]

The Government accordingly introduced a Bill "for more effectually preventing Seditious Meetings and Assemblies."

To simplify our consideration of the subject I give at once the principal provisions of the Bill as it became law.

As was usual in those times the Act began with a preamble. In this case the preamble ran as follows: "Whereas in divers parts of this kingdom assemblies of large numbers of persons collected from various parishes and districts under the pretext of deliberating upon public grievances, and of agreeing on Petitions, Complaints, Remonstrances, Declarations, Resolutions, or Addresses upon the subject thereof, have of late been held in disturbance of the public peace, to the great terror and danger of his Majesty's loyal and peaceable subjects, and in a manner manifestly tending to produce confusion and calamities in the nation." The Act then proceeded to enact that no meeting of any description of persons exceeding the number of fifty persons (except county meetings, etc., duly convened) shall be holden for the purpose, or on the pretext, of deliberating upon any public grievance, or upon any matter or thing relating to any trade, manufacture, or business, or profession, or

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 348.

upon any matter in Church or State; or of considering, proposing, or agreeing to any Petition, Complaint, Remonstrance, Declaration, Resolution, or Address, upon the subject thereof, unless in separate parishes or townships, and where persons calling the meeting shall usually inhabit, and unless notice in writing, signed by seven householders of the parish, of the intention to hold such meeting, and of the time and place, when and where, and of the purpose for which the same shall be proposed to be holden, shall be delivered to a magistrate of the district.[1]

The magistrates were given the power to alter both the place and the date named by the applicants, thus simultaneous meetings were guarded against. That was a power they were not given before. But a more ingenious and deadly blow than any which had previously been devised was the enactment that no person should attend a meeting unless such a person was a resident of the district for which the meeting was held; and herein was the great difference between this Act and that of 1817. If the meeting were a county one, a freeholder of the county might attend; but in a meeting of the district or parish, no one but an inhabitant of the district or parish might attend, and any person contravening this law might, on conviction, be punished by a fine and twelve months' imprisonment.

If any such persons attended, the magistrate might, by proclamation, order them to depart, and if they did not do so, they rendered themselves liable to be adjudged felons, and to a punishment of seven years' transportation, or if any meeting was held in contravention to the terms of this Act they incurred a similar penalty. If any magistrate at a meeting thought fit

[1] 60 Geo. III. cap. 6.

to order any person propounding or maintaining propositions for altering anything by law established except by authority of King, Lords, and Commons, into custody, he might do so; in case of any obstruction he might order the meeting to disperse, and any disobeyal laid the offenders open to the penalty of some seven years' transportation. Justices, etc., were indemnified for any loss of life, maiming, etc., resulting from resistance to their orders.

Two exemptions were made to these provisions. "Nothing hereinbefore contained shall extend, or be construed to extend, to any meeting or assembly which shall be wholly holden in any room or apartment of any house or building;" or to meetings for returning members to Parliament. Furthermore, it was enacted, that no persons were to attend any meeting whatsoever, with any arms of any sort, nor were they to attend meetings with banners, flags, or other ensigns, or emblems. And then followed the provisions with which Acts of 1795 and 1817 have made us familiar, against lecture rooms and debating societies. In one respect was the Act more lenient than that of 1817—namely, that the penalty for not obeying the order of the magistrates or resisting authority was reduced from "death without benefit of clergy" to a sentence of not more than seven years' transportation. The exemption as regards meetings "wholly holden in any room or apartment of any house or building," on the surface of it looks a considerable one, but in reality scarcely afforded any relaxation of the stringency of the measure.

The Bill was introduced into the House of Commons and read a first time on the 29th November, Lord Castlereagh being its sponsor and expounder. From

the introduction of so tremendous a measure against public meeting and freedom of discussion, one might be led to infer that there were no existing restrictions on public meetings. This, however, was very far from being the case, and renders the action of the Government only the more inexcusable. The law on the subject had been expounded by Mr. Plunket[1] with clearness and eloquence in the House of Commons.

He said, "The right of the people of this country to meet for the purpose of expressing their opinions on any subject connected with their own individual interest, or with the public welfare, was beyond all question. It was a sacred privilege, belonging to the most humble, as fully as to the highest subject in the community; they had a right to the full expression, and to the free communication of such sentiments; to interchange them with their fellow-subjects; to animate and catch fire, each from the other. But he must say that these rights, like all others, to be exercised in civil society, must be subject to such modification and restriction, as to render them compatible with other rights equally acknowledged and equally sacred. Every subject of this realm had an undoubted right to the protection of the laws, to the security of his person and property, and still more to the full assurance of such safety; and he had no hesitation in asserting that any assembly of the people, held under such circumstances as to excite in the minds of the King's peaceable and loyal subjects reasonable grounds of alarm in this respect, were illegal assemblies, and liable to be dispersed as such. . . .

"Any assembly of the people, whether armed or unarmed, whether using or threatening to use force, or

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, 1819, vol. xli. p. 129.

"not doing so, and whether the avowed object was illegal or legal, if held in such numbers, or with such language, or emblems, or deportment, as to create well-grounded terror in the King's liege subjects for their lives, their persons, or their property, was an illegal assembly, and might be dispersed as such. Such had been the law as laid down by the ablest of our lawyers, and of our judges, from the earliest period of our jurisprudence, and in the best time of our history, and Constitution, before the Revolution, and since the Revolution, independent of the Riot Act, or of any statutable enactment by the principles of our common law, which was always founded on the principles of common sense."

This was not, however, enough for the Government. Though they arrested many people for attending illegal meetings, this did not satisfy them, they wanted powers to deal with the origin of all the mischief—the meetings, and with the more notorious speakers at them. "Those individuals who reduced grievance-making into a trade would no longer have it in their power to travel about the land, and poison the minds of men who had not been aware but that they lived under the mildest Government, and had not known that their greatest enemy was the House of Commons." [1]

Lord Sidmouth enumerated clearly enough what he considered were the deficiencies of the existing state of the law, and his speech is important as showing what control the Government thought they should have over the Platform.

"The existing law did not prescribe any mode of giving notice (of a meeting), or superintendence (of a meeting) by magistrates. It in no way regulated the

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 390.

manner of attending meetings; it did not prohibit going to meetings in military array, or carrying to them weapons; it did not prevent simultaneous meetings, nor the continuance of meetings by adjournment; it did not prevent assembling with flags and banners; if seditious or treasonable language were spoken it did not, besides empowering a magistrate to order the person offending into custody, also enable him, in the case of resistance, to declare the meeting illegal; it did not provide against a great abuse, the evil effects of which had been extensively experienced—namely, that when the inhabitants of a particular town or district were summoned to a meeting, so many strangers attended, that the majority of the meeting did not consist of such inhabitants. Neither did it provide against the most pernicious practice of itinerant orators attending public meetings, and collecting vast multitudes to hear their harangues—all these great evils for which the existing law had no remedy."[1]

It will have been observed how thoroughly the Act met all these deficiencies, but it did even more than this, for it practically prevented any meetings whatever in some districts, whilst all meetings were placed under the censorship of the local magistracy, and thus the whole public opinion of the country, as expressible from the Platform, could be controlled and manipulated by the Government and its henchmen, and would be absolutely at their mercy. The measure was in effect far more restrictive in its operation than the Act of 1817, or that of 1795, and having been drafted with greater ingenuity and thoroughness, it left no loophole open for evasion.

The intense detestation of the Platform by the

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 1235.

Government is further emphasised by the fact that they had the audacity to propose that this crushing measure should be part and parcel of the permanent law of the country. They calmly proposed that from that time forth for evermore all public meetings in Great Britain should be under these intolerable restrictions, that the coming together of the people and the expression of their opinions should be under the censorship of the magistrates, and that all England should, as it were, be parcelled out into little bits, into which it should be felony for any stranger, however eminent, to enter and to endeavour to address the people.

One has to go back to the days of the Inquisition and the rule of a Philip II. of Spain to find a parallel for such intolerance of spoken opinion. Lord Liverpool must primarily be held responsible for it, but the real discredit and shame must fall on his active lieutenants—Lords Sidmouth and Castlereagh. It was contended by Government, though their contention was false on the very face of it, that they were only suppressing the tumultuous and illegitimate expression of opinion, that they had not infringed at all in the right of public meeting and petitioning. "If anything, indeed, they had fenced that right round and made it tenfold securer," said Lord Sidmouth; though how, it would have puzzled even him to explain.

Lord Castlereagh declared, with that detestable hypocrisy, which was so common in the speeches of the leading Tory statesmen of those days, and which at times was so patent and so glaring that one wonders that they had the barefacedness to make the statements they did: "He had no wish to prevent people from assembling when deliberation was really the object which they had in view; he had no wish to put an end

to those meetings which were the peculiar boast of England, and which, till modern times, had been productive of so much benefit and advantage";[1] and yet, he was devoting days and weeks to obtaining legislation from Parliament, which would have the very effect he so hypocritically deprecated.

Great stress was laid on the fact that duly convened county meetings were exempted. The exemption, however, was little more than a mockery. Lord Folkestone pointed out in the course of the debates that "county meetings were indeed left open, but after the so prevailing fashion of the sheriffs refusing to convene them, could it be mistaken that the object was to prevent altogether those numerous meetings in which Englishmen communicated to one another their sentiments of attachment to the laws of their Constitution, and of opposition to the inroads of arbitrary power?"

Mr. Coke supported this view. "Who had ever heard of a Lord Lieutenant," he said, "calling a public meeting? and who had not heard that most respectable requisitions for public meetings had been frequently refused by sheriffs?"[2] And Brougham quoted four cases in which, within the preceding two months, the sheriffs had refused requisitions to convene a county meeting. Another conclusive proof that the determination of the Government was to suppress all public discussion absolutely and completely, was to be found in their proposal that the Act should extend to the whole of Great Britain, though it was admitted on all sides, themselves included, and was indeed evident to all men, that the occurrences which the Bill was meant to check were confined entirely to one part of the country—namely, Lancashire, Cheshire, some districts in Yorkshire, and some parts of Scotland.

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 387. [2] *Ibid.* p. 644.

The attempt was made by the popular party in the House to limit the sphere of the Act, but that would not have suited the purpose of the Government, and they declined to give way. On one point, however, from very shame sake, they were obliged to make a concession. After much pressure they gave way as to the permanency of the Act, and contented themselves by fixing the period in which it was to remain in force as five years, and to the end of the next session of Parliament—that is to say, till about the middle of the year 1825. The second reading of the Bill was carried by 351 to 128 in the House of Commons, or a majority of 223, and it soon became law. Outside the House but little effort was made to stay the hands of the Government whilst the Bill was under discussion. Experience had proved to the people that such efforts were useless. Parliament and the Regent ever turned a deaf ear to all their complaints, and, moreover, the legislation was hurried through Parliament with such rapidity that but little time was available for remonstrating. Westminster, true to the last, held a meeting on 8th December, and petitioned against the proposed legislation. Sir F. Burdett presided. He laid down very clearly his views on the right of which they were about to be deprived. He considered the right of public meeting to be a right of nature, derived from no Government, and too sacred to be interfered with by any set of men. "When God gave to them the means of communicating their thoughts one to another, He sanctioned that communication, and sanctioned also the best means by which that communication could be effected."

The Petition was ordered to lie on the table, and to be printed, but nothing more came of it.

Before, and whilst this Act was being obtained from

Parliament, the Government had been putting the ordinary law into action in their efforts to silence the Platform. To give the result of the prosecutions it will be necessary to trench somewhat on the history of the next year or two, but for the sake of getting a view of their action as a whole, it will be convenient to mention those results here.

Immediately after the Manchester meeting of 16th August Hunt, Bamford, and eight other men, and one woman, were charged with "high treason."[1] This charge was too preposterous to be sustainable, and the Government had to content itself with proceeding on a lesser one.

On the 16th of March 1820 Hunt and nine others, including Samuel Bamford, were tried at the Spring Assizes at York on an indictment of several "counts" for conspiracy and unlawful assembling. Five of them were found "not guilty" on any of the "counts." Hunt, Bamford, and three others were convicted only on one—namely, that they "unlawfully, maliciously, and seditiously did meet and assemble themselves together, with divers other persons, for the purpose of raising and exciting discontent and disaffection in the minds of the liege subjects of the King, and for the purpose of moving and exciting them to hatred and contempt of the Government and Constitution of the realm as by law established";[2] and thus, by a verdict in a court of law, the celebrated Manchester or Peterloo meeting was declared to have been an illegal one. Hunt was sentenced to two years' and six months' imprisonment, and then to find security for his good behaviour for five years. Bamford and two others to one year's imprisonment and then security.

[1] Bamford, vol. i. pp. 249-251. [2] *State Trials*, New Series, vol. i. p. 171, etc.

Other prosecutions were also persevered in. On the 1st of April (1820) eight men who had participated in the Habergham Eaves meeting, near Burnley, which has already been described, were tried "for unlawfully conspiring to assemble an unlawful meeting, for attending an unlawful meeting, and for causing people to go armed to a public meeting." Two were acquitted, the rest convicted. Knight and two others got two years' imprisonment; one, eighteen months' imprisonment; one, fifteen months; one, a year's imprisonment.

On the 10th of April 1820 Sir C. Wolseley, the "Legislatorial Attorney" and representative of Birmingham, and the Rev. J. Harrison, were indicted for attending "an unlawful assembly at Stockport on 28th of July 1819, and for a conspiracy to cause a riot." They were found guilty and each sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment.

Curiously enough, one of the cases which one might naturally have thought the Government would have been anxious to press forward before all others, was delayed. The trial of five of the principal men who had taken part in the celebrated meeting at Birmingham on the 12th July 1819, at which Sir C. Wolseley had been elected, did not take place for more than a year after their offence—namely, on the 3d of August 1820.[1] The charge against them was, "Devising and intending to raise and to excite discontent and disaffection in the minds of some of the liege subjects of the King, and to move them to hatred and contempt of the Government and Constitution of the realm as by law established, and that they unlawfully and seditiously did combine and conspire together to

[1] There is a slight mistake in the report of these cases in the volume of *State Trials*. The date of the trial is there given throughout as 1821. It took place a year earlier—namely, in August 1820.

nominate, elect, and appoint a person to be the representative of the inhabitants of Birmingham, and to claim admission as such into the Commons House of Parliament as a member thereof"; also for assembling for the purpose of hearing divers scandalous seditious and inflammatory speeches, etc., and several other intricate legal charges, or, as they are technically called, "counts." The prisoners were convicted. A legal point being reserved, they were not sentenced till the following May. Then the judge, in sentencing them, delivered a political homily: "Now, having gone through the detail of the speeches which were used at that time, can any man doubt that those speeches were calculated to raise in the minds of those persons by whom they were heard dissatisfaction and belief that they were deprived of certain rights, and to excite contempt and dislike of the Commons House of Parliament?"[1] He commented on the gravity of the offence, and said: "That a very heavy offence had been committed." He inveighed against the argument that every man had a right to a vote, and stated that "Every man has not a right to concur in the appointment of his own legislators. Every man is represented by every member of Parliament, and when a member of Parliament is returned to Parliament, he acts, not merely for those individuals by whom he is sent, but it is his bounden duty to act for every individual throughout the whole of the kingdom. . . . It is one of the principles of our law that though a particular place elects a member, as soon as he is elected, he is not to be considered as the representative of the particular place only, but of the kingdom at large."

Edmunds was sentenced to nine months' imprisonment, Maddocks eighteen months, Wooller fifteen months,

[1] *State Trials*, New Series, vol. i. p. 946.

and all to give security for good conduct for five years; Cartwright, being very old, was let off with a fine of £100.

It is unnecessary to pursue this branch of the matter further. Doubtless, were we to rake still further among the dusty files of legal records, we should find numerous enough traces of other prosecutions. Thus at Pontefract Sessions, in 1820,[1] one Mitchell, otherwise unknown to fame, was found guilty "of having uttered certain seditious words" in a speech at a meeting near Halifax, and was sent to prison for six months, and then had to find bail.

Sufficient instances have been given to show the determination of the Government to suppress the Platform by every means within their reach or power.

Twice, then, within the brief period of three years, had Lord Liverpool's Ministry, in their last and desperate effort to check the rising demand for Parliamentary reform, done their utmost to suppress public meetings and freedom of speech.

The violence of some of the language used on the Platform, the imposing numbers at meetings, were in themselves sufficiently grave and disconcerting occurrences to some of the more timid classes. But when Ministers, for their own party ends, stirred once more into flame the nearly extinguished embers of the horror excited by the Reign of Terror, and threw upon these speeches and these meetings the dread light of revolution, the agitation assumed to many an aspect of imminent danger and impending revolution.

These large and formidable-looking meetings were undoubtedly more demonstrations of physical force than meetings for deliberation, but following as they did on the outrages and disturbances of 1812, they show a dis-

[1] *The Examiner*, p. 261, 1820.

tinct progress or improvement in popular action. In 1812 there had been no platforming, no petitioning, only nocturnal gatherings and secret oaths, and recourse to physical force. Now the people came together in open public meetings; there may not have been much deliberation at their meetings, but the first step towards it was taken once they adopted the Platform, trying to voice their complaints and distresses; there was a display of physical force, but that, with public speech, was better than dumb physical force, venting itself in outrage and violence.

But instead of welcoming the expression of popular wants and grievances, as throwing light on the needs of the people, and affording a guide for a policy which would tend to good order, prosperity, and contentment, the Government, irritated and vexed beyond measure, betrayed to the world their deep-seated virulent antipathy to the people.

The truth was, they did not care to hear anything from the people—they did not want to know anything about them—they scouted their opinions or wishes—they repudiated their claims to just government, much more their claims to a voice in the government—they jeered at their asserted rights as founded on the pernicious teaching of French revolutionists.

One needs to peruse the political speeches of the day to realise at all the apprehensions, real or assumed, which filled the breasts of some of the leading politicians, the fury with which others of them stigmatised every one, and everything that made for a reform of the existing state of the Constitution. In their furious wrath language was used by them, often far more hostile to liberty, more treasonable to the public weal, and more destructive to freedom than any used against

the Constitution by the most rabid demagogue who was prosecuted for seditious language. The shifts to which they were put in their endeavours to combat the claims of the people for a share in the Government were extreme. Often were they so glaringly absurd that we can scarcely credit the speakers with believing them. The most indefensible abuses that helped to that end were defended. Even sinecures found a defender in the Prime Minister, who himself said, "The abolition of sinecures appeared to him to be a matter of at least very doubtful policy."

Those interested in the maintenance of the system, however, were determined to use their utmost strength in preserving it. Strong still in the support of the nominees of rotten boroughs; powerful by virtue of a shameless corruption and enormous patronage, the Government determined to silence the Platform—the voice of the people—as the simplest and most efficacious way of dealing with the growing popular demands, and of cutting short arguments which they were unable to meet with any even plausible reason. They struck, therefore, as Pitt had done, and as they themselves had once done already—only this time it was a more crafty insidious blow. Rallying to the call of the Government, the ministerial majority in the short period of a month passed that comprehensive code of repressive legislation, "the Six Acts." Thus once more was the Platform struck down—the right of public meeting, except in a room or house, was taken away, the right of freedom of speech with it, and the two most potent factors in political liberty, and political education, were at one blow, for the time being, destroyed.

CHAPTER XII

THE PLATFORM'S PROGRESS UNDER GEORGE III

On the 29th of January 1820, within a few weeks of the third attempt to annihilate the Platform by legislative enactment, the aged king, after a reign of sixty years, died. Had he been capable of understanding what was passing around him, his closing days might have been soothed and cheered by seeing the foe with which he had so often grappled lying bound hand and foot. Time after time, from the days long passed, when the gage of battle had been thrown down by the Middlesex electors, had he wrestled with it, and temporarily triumphed; but again and again had it risen with renewed and increased strength. Now, however, there lay his foe, helpless and inert, bound with bonds stronger than before, not to stir again while the life-blood flowed in his veins.

His reign had been an eventful one. For sixty years had he filled the throne—filled it while democracy, which he hated with the most intense hatred, was being registered and recorded for all time in the republican "Constitution" of the United States of America, and while it was being ushered into the European world in the birth-throes of the French Revolution; filled it while, by slow degrees, the country over which he ruled

was being indoctrinated with democratic ideas; while new generations were growing up, with altogether higher ideals and loftier principles than those that had hitherto prevailed. He and his Ministers had succeeded with ever-increasing difficulty in holding at bay, at home, the outward visible form of democracy, but the inward spiritual power was beyond their reach.

As a last desperate effort they had struck down the Platform and silenced it, but the Platform already possessed an indestructible life and was beyond their utmost power to crush. What was feeble and weak when he ascended the throne had become strong and powerful; what were tendencies then had developed into unalterable determinations; the seeds had grown into strong trees, and, more than ever before, was the whole bent of mind and character of the people in the direction of public meeting and public speaking.

To such strength had the Platform now grown that not for long would it submit to the restraints put upon it; a little more, and its freedom from all such restraints would be for ever assured.

Before proceeding to describe its revival from the blow dealt to it, and the final accomplishment of its freedom, it will be well to enumerate briefly the causes which were contributing to make it so irresistible a power.

Those causes were partly intellectual and moral, partly physical and material. All through the long reign of the late King great democratic influences were at work—some literary and theoretical, others actual and visible; and slowly but surely new intellectual and moral forces were being marshalled against the existing system of Government—forces which at times operated quietly and unobtrusively, yet which every now and

then, as some new burst of conviction or some new ferment of mind took place, moved the people to life and action, and impelled them to give expression to their feelings. Had a proper system of representative government existed, these forces might have found a partial vent through the representative body; but, owing to the defective and little more than nominal system that existed, and to its utter and complete inadequacy as a form of government for a people ambitious beyond all things of self-government, they were driven to seek vent elsewhere, and they sought and found it in or through the Platform.

These new forces were all in the direction of greater freedom, of greater equality, and of a more liberal and representative system of Government. The whole course of intellectual thought was flowing in this direction, except such thought as those possessed who, at the time, monopolised the power and advantages of Government. The belief that men had a right to govern themselves—so far as any system of Government could secure that end—had spread widely among the people; the consciousness of their capacity to do so had likewise grown, and the conviction had strengthened that the admission of the great bulk of the people into their proper share of the Government would be for the general advantage and welfare of the State — these were feelings and opinions which could not be long held with sincerity without passing into action.

The contemporary literature of the end of George III.'s reign and the beginning of George IV.'s reign testifies to and describes the great changes which had been going on in the country. Innumerable quotations might be given, but a few from diametrically opposite sides of political life must suffice.

The *Quarterly Review* (the organ of Toryism), in an article published in January 1820, thus wrote: "From the date of the Revolution (1688) downwards the general intelligence of the people has kept growing, their facilities of intercourse have multiplied, and their love of political discussion has been more and more inflamed. . . . The progress of knowledge neither Ministers nor Parliaments, were they capable of entertaining a project so detestable, can in any sensible degree impede. . . . Neither the measures before us (the Six Acts) nor any other similar regulations will ever have power to arrest the extension of intellectual light among the people. The voice of knowledge has gone forth, never to be recalled. It would be as easy to restore the rain to the cloud from which it has parted as to re-expel from the bosom of an immense and educated society all those streams of instruction which have sunk into it, insinuating themselves into every crevice, reaching every root, and mingling with the moisture of every rising spring."[1]

Another Tory organ (*Blackwood's Magazine*), in an article in November 1824, wrote: "We mean to maintain that, in intellect, the standard is much higher than it was half a century ago."

On the popular side other authorities may be quoted. Cobbett, some few years previously, in "An Address to the Country Gentlemen,"[2] wrote: "It is quite useless for you to endeavour to discourage and check the progress of political knowledge. That knowledge has gone forth like the rays of the sun bursting a black cloud asunder; and it is as impossible to destroy the effect of that knowledge as it would be to smother

[1] *Quarterly Review*, vol. xxii. p. 556.

[2] See *Political Register* December 1816.

the rays of the sun. Even *error*, when strongly imprinted on the mind, has always been found extremely difficult to efface. What, then, is to efface *truth* when imprinted on the mind in fair and distinct characters?"

From the Whig side a passage may be quoted from an article in the *Edinburgh Review* of December 1818:[1] "The number of those who take an interest in political affairs has increased with a rapidity formerly unknown. The political public has become not only far more numerous, but more intelligent, more ardent, more bold, and more active. During the last thirty years its numbers have been increased, more perhaps than in any equal period since the Reformation, by the diffusion of knowledge, by the pressure of public distress, and by the magnitude of revolutions, sufficient to rouse an attention which would have slumbered in the noiseless tenor of common events. The course of the late general election has laid open much of this important change. . . . No man has canvassed a county in England who has not felt that political opinions have penetrated into places where they never before reached."

The Examiner,[2] an advanced Liberal paper, wrote about the same period: "There are great causes which visibly work effect upon public opinion; but it is also moved by small, constant, almost daily, influences. One of the first and most evident is the increase of knowledge and thought among the community at large. This increase within the last thirty years has been in a ratio equally extraordinary and extreme. Men now are fast ceasing to take matters for granted. They no longer believe that a thing should be, merely because it is. They inquire, they investigate, they analyse. The

[1] *Edinburgh Review*, vol. xxxi. p. 171—"Universal Suffrage."

[2] See *The Examiner*, 1823, p. 2.

"spread of education has given them the means, and they are quite ready to exercise them fully and with effect. What are the causes of all this? We regard the chiefest and greatest to be the increase of trade, in its broadest sense —commerce, domestic and external, and manufactures. Manufactures congregate men together, and the collision of mind is one of the greatest condiments to its advance. . . . The bringing numbers together in the towns has occasioned more 'march of mind' in half a century than agricultural causes would operate to the end of time. As a proof of this, the increased diffusion of knowledge is nearly coeval with the extension of manufactures, suddenly consequent as it was upon the invention and improvement of machinery, and the wonderful facilitation of internal intercourse. Manufactures necessitate some instruction and ingenuity; they nearly all involve a craft which must be learned; and the cultivation of intellect in one particular tends to its expansion in all. Manufactures and trade have given rise to a vast body of wealthy men, unconnected with the interests, and free from the prejudices, of the hereditary proprietors of land. . . . These men, now a body of great, and every day increasing, importance in the State, have no old associations and feelings to bind them to a system of aristocratic tendency."

The Scotsman, an important Liberal newspaper of the time, wrote: "An astonishing development of intellect has taken place in the lower and middle ranks of the people within the last thirty years. The people are no longer an ignorant mass. They have intellectual, and moral, as well as physical, wants."

And from Manchester—a fair type of many other places—we have testimony, dated 1823: "During the last forty years the mind of the labouring class (taking

them as a body) has been progressively improving, and, within the last twenty years, has made an advance of centuries." [1]

These extracts present a concurrence of opinion as to the universal and most remarkable progress of knowledge in the country. But it was not merely the change effected among the people by the spread of knowledge, by their improving intelligence, by their wider information, that was bringing the Platform into prominence. It was the growth of great classes of men who, owing to the restricted basis of the House of Commons, found themselves outside the pale of the Constitution.

There was first that great middle class, the source of so much that was best in the country. The increasing trade and commerce of the country had produced a large, commercial, or upper industrial class of as highly educated, intelligent, and wealthy men as any in the kingdom. Their numbers were rapidly increasing, their wealth becoming ever greater, their stake in the kingdom ever larger, and their business training rendering them ever fitter for a share in the responsibilities of government. The rigidity of the existing system of Parliamentary representation, however, prevented their admission into the Constitution, the jealousy of the upper class resented their even aspiring to it. Accordingly, they found themselves excluded from any direct representation in Parliament. A great class such as this must of necessity have the means of making its voice heard, and of representing its views to the Government and Legislature. It might be condemned to exclusion from the Constitution: it could

[1] See Guest's *Compendious History of the Cotton Manufacture* (Manchester, 1823).

not be condemned to silence. Novel questions of vast consequence not alone to it, but also to the country at large, were every now and then coming up for consideration—questions which necessitated public discussion and the interchange of ideas and communication with their fellow-countrymen and with the Government. Parliament being closed against them, and the Press being insufficient for the purpose, there remained only the Platform. The Platform was, in fact, the only real means these men had—wealthy, intelligent, talented, though large numbers of them were—for representing their views to the Government.

Their need for the Platform showed itself plainly in the years 1811 and 1812, two questions having then arisen which led to Parliament being almost deluged with Petitions,[1]—the one, the evil effects of the Orders in Council respecting trade; and the other, the renewal of the Charter of the East India Company—both of which materially affected not alone their interests but the trade and material wellbeing of the country. And though all the Petitions sent to Parliament on these occasions were not preluded by public meetings, still great numbers of them were.

But there was another great class, greater in numbers and physical strength, which, as we have already seen, had been feeling the need of the Platform as an instrument of expression. This was the great civic industrial working-class population—not the wealthy men of capital and education who had devised and started

[1] The increase in the number of public petitions presented to the House of Commons shows the greater demands being made on Parliament.

		Annual average.
In the five years ended 1789,	880 Petitions had been presented.	176
,, ,, 1805,	1026 ,, ,,	205
,, ,, 1815,	4498 ,, ,,	900

—See *Parliamentary Papers*, 1831-32, vol. v. p. 335.

the great manufactories, or originated the industrial schemes which afforded labour to the people, but the great mass of artisans or labourers, skilled and skilless, hewers of wood, drawers of water, delvers in the mines, the physical force of the nation, the producers of its wealth, the developers of its natural resources.

Great towns like Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, and a host of others had doubled and doubled in size; great ports like Liverpool, Bristol, Hull, and Glasgow, had risen to imperial importance; great manufacturing districts had sprung up as under the wand of a magician; vast mines had been discovered and laid open; and population had gone on increasing and increasing. Of this increased population the bulk lived on the very verge of existence, and even so to live had to give all its time, all its energies, and strength, to one unceasing toil—happy when it got the chance, the opportunity, of toil.

Yet, though sunk in the depths of poverty and ignorance, and the vices which flow from ignorance, and degraded almost to the level of the machines which they tended or worked, these men were none the less human beings, with human wants as urgent, and capacities as great, and rights as imprescriptible as those of any other class of the population.

Not for ever could those "dingy, dumb millions, grimed with dust and sweat," remain silent in their pitiable condition; still less when million was added to million. They felt they must speak—their circumstances, their lot, impelled them,—and then they felt the need of some means of making their voice heard. If they had no representative to depict their condition to the Government, they would at least endeavour to tell it to the world themselves. If they were to languish and pine

away, at least it were better to proclaim to their countrymen the condition they were in than silently to go down into the great deep in the struggle for existence. Possibly some help might come to them if they were to cry out, and cry loud enough.

The first strivings of these people toward the Platform had become audible in our history while the great drama of the French Revolution was being enacted before an awestruck world. But they were promptly suppressed by Habeas Corpus Suspension Acts, and Seditious Meetings and Assemblies Acts, and sank back into silent and despairing hopelessness. Years passed before they again attempted to amend their condition; then they broke out into violence and outrage (1812); but that being worse even than endurance, they again essayed to speak. Circumstances had somewhat changed in the meanwhile; their numbers had multiplied; they felt their own strength more; they were awakening to a keener sense of their rights and their wrongs; they were becoming familiarised to the Platform by seeing others having recourse to it; and they took it to themselves as the one means of making the world hear of them and their condition. And though they were long left to themselves, none of the middle or upper classes co-operating with them, the world was, nevertheless, made to hear much of them. The more intelligent among them sought for remedies in political change, the others followed them. Their proposals may have been crude and extreme; their ideas utterly fallacious; their schemes more likely to plunge them in deeper difficulties, if that were possible; but it is vividly to be remembered, and entirely in extenuation of their action, were extenuation required, that these people were wholly without representatives in Parliament—they were

without leaders; they were ignorant and inexperienced; they had the profoundest and most justifiable distrust of the boroughmongered, ministerial-ridden Parliament; they had petitioned that Parliament time after time, but their petitions were addressed to ears unwilling to hear.

After a few years' enjoyment of the Platform, it was snatched from their grasp, Lord Sidmouth and his colleagues being anxious to deprive them of even the luxury of complaint. But the Act prohibiting their meetings having expired, they again returned to the Platform.

And now, again, the same autocratic Ministry, and the same boroughmonger-appointed Parliament, feeling that privilege, sinecures, and many other enjoyable monopolies, were being endangered by the Platform, had once more deprived them of it, had showed themselves anxious to deprive them and their fellow-countrymen of it for ever.

But with two great classes such as these, outside the pale of the Constitution,—the wealthy and highly-educated, commercial, and industrial class, and the great civic industrial population of the country, both of them rapidly increasing in numbers, and becoming almost the most important element in the strength, as well as in the wealth of the country,—public meetings and the Platform were a necessity of public life.

These two classes had hitherto held more or less aloof from each other, and the agitations of 1816, 1817, and of 1819 were almost exclusively the work of the poorer part of the civil industrial population. They had, however, this in common, that Parliament was a close borough inaccessible to their representations. They were "virtually represented," they were told,

by the nominees of the owners of Brackley or West Looe, or other distinguished constituencies of that sort, and ought therewith to be content—just as if "virtual representation" was the same thing as actual representation—but this fiction or lie of "virtual representation," which the ministerial majority so fondly cherished, was an argument only fit for a lunatic asylum, if even for that, and was not likely to be borne with much longer. Canning, the only really astute and farseeing statesman of his time, discerned the weak spot in the existing system, and had done his best to controvert the necessity for the Platform, or for Parliamentary reform, by dwelling on the sufficiency of the Parliament as it then existed for all popular purposes. In a speech which he delivered at Manchester in 1812 (immediately after his election for Liverpool), and where he had the splendid audacity to assert that "the interests of *unrepresented* Manchester are safe among the represented interests of England," he said: "Some persons think that the House of Commons ought to be all in all in the Constitution; and that every portion of the people ought to be immediately, actively, and perpetually in contact with their particular representatives in the House of Commons. If this were a true view of the Constitution, undoubtedly the present scheme of representation is inadequate. But if this be true, we are living under a different Constitution from that of England. I think we have the happiness to live under a limited Monarchy, not under a crowned Republic. And I think the House of Commons, as at present constituted, is equal to its functions, because I conceive it to be the office of the members of the House of Commons not to conduct the government themselves, but to watch over and control the Ministers of the Crown; to

represent and to speak the opinion of the people—to speak it in a voice of thunder if their interests are neglected, or their rights invaded; but to do this, not as an assembly of delegates from independent states, but as a body of men chosen from among the whole community, to unite their efforts in promoting the general interests of the country at large."[1]

Six years later, in 1818, he devoted a great part of a speech which he delivered at the close of the election for Liverpool to the same subject. He said: "The Constitution of this country is a Monarchy, controlled by two assemblies—the one hereditary, and independent alike of the Crown and the people; the other elected by and for the people, but elected for the purpose of controlling, and not of administering, the government. The error of the reformers, if error it can be called, is that they argue as if the Constitution of this country was a broad and level democracy, inlaid (for ornament sake) with a peerage, and topped (by sufferance) with a Crown. If they say that for such a Constitution—that is, in effect for an uncontrolled democracy—the present House of Commons is not sufficiently popular, they are right; but such a Constitution is not what we have, or what we desire. We are born under a Monarchy which it is our duty, as much as it is for our own happiness, to preserve, and which there cannot be a shadow of doubt that the reforms which are recommended to us would destroy. . . .[2]

"If any man tell me that the popular principle in the House of Commons is not strong enough for effective control (over the acts of monarchical power), nor diffused enough to ensure sympathy with the people, I appeal to the whole course of the transactions of the last war; I

[1] *Canning's Speeches*, edited by T. Kaye, p. 78. [2] *Ibid.* p. 225.

"desire to have cited to me the instances in which the House of Commons has failed, either to express the matured and settled opinion of the nation, or to convey it to the Crown. . . . If, on the other hand, it be only meant to say that the House of Commons is not the *whole government* of the country—which, if all power be not only *for* but *in* the people, the House of Commons ought to be, if the people were adequately represented,—I answer, 'Thank God it is not so! God forbid that it should ever aim at becoming so!'

"But they look far short of the ultimate effect of the doctrines of the present day who do not see that their tendency is not to make a House of Commons such as, in theory, it has always been defined—a third branch of the Legislature, but to absorb the legislative and executive powers into one; to create an immediate delegation of the whole authority of the people—to which, practically, nothing could, and, in reasoning, nothing ought to stand in opposition."

Cleverly as it was argued, his contention did not meet the whole case, for even if Parliament fulfilled in the most complete and perfect manner the utmost that the most perfect theory of popular representation could have demanded, there would still have been the necessity for the Platform. How much greater was the need for it, when the popular representation which existed in the House of Commons was only very limited in extent; when the majority of even the popular branch of the Legislature was constituted of the nominees of borough-mongers, or of powerful members of the aristocracy, and was under a control opposed to all popular rights, ambitions, or desires.

That the need for the Platform was becoming ever greater is, I think, demonstratively proved by the fact

that the resort to it was steadily increasing, in spite of disappointments as to the results, in spite of discouragement, in spite of prohibition, in spite of punishments. Contrast the number of meetings in previous agitations and in this which had just been suppressed. In the early days of the Platform the meetings were easily counted, for a political meeting then was a great, a memorable event, and a few county meetings went to make up an agitation. The number of meetings held in the agitation against the passing of the Two Acts was the largest of any in the last century, but as an agitation it could not be compared with that of 1819. Contrast, too, the numbers attending the meetings of previous agitations and this one. The "not fewer than 400, many of them substantial people," which Burke speaks of with satisfaction as having been present at the meeting at Aylesbury in 1769, the 800 which Sir G. Savile estimated as being present at York in the same year—contrast these with the tens of thousands that were present at the meeting at Manchester, or the thousands at Halifax, York, and other places. Even making every allowance for exaggeration in the estimate of the numbers of those present, still it is beyond controversy that the numbers attending these later meetings were far greater than had ever been seen before.

Moreover, as years had gone on, the action of the Platform had become more pertinacious, less intermittent —showing clearly that the people were no longer going to let affairs go on for any length of time without commenting on them. Instead of decades between Platform agitations, such as occurred between the Middlesex Election Agitation, the Economy Agitation, and the Agitation consequent on the French Revolution, the gaps diminished to quite short periods, witness the quickly following

agitations on the disgraceful episodes connected with Lord Melville in 1805, the Duke of York, Lord Castlereagh, and Mr. Perceval in 1809, the Anti-Corn Law Agitation of 1814 and 1815, the Agitations of 1816 and 1817, and lastly, that of 1819.

The debates in the House of Commons afford proof of this. They disclose that the effect of this more frequent action of the Platform was making itself felt there, and that members of Parliament were themselves becoming aware of the change that was taking place in the volume and strength of public opinion. We find there numerous acknowledgments of the growing power of outside opinion, numerous recognitions of its strength. Thus, speaking in 1819, Plunket said: "The state of society in this country had, within the last twenty or thirty years, undergone a greater change than from the period of the Conquest until the time of which he spoke. Within that interval the public attention has been called to the consideration of every measure connected with the administration of the Government in a degree hitherto unprecedented. There had been an intensity of light shed upon all subjects—civil, political, and religious—so that measures were now scanned with minuteness which were scarcely looked into, or at most, but generally known before."[1]

Canning, speaking in December 1819, said:[2] "Public opinion was represented by his honourable friend (Sir J. Mackintosh), and truly represented, as possessing now tenfold force at the present compared with former times. Not only was public opinion advanced, but its power was accumulated, and conveyed by appropriate organs, and made to bear upon legisla-

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. xli. p. 1044. [2] *Ibid.* p. 1547.

tion and government, upon the conduct of individuals, and upon the proceedings of both Houses of Parliament."

Speaking in February 1821, Lord Castlereagh complainingly said: "There appeared a growing disposition on the part of the public to drag every subject before the House—a disposition which was fed by the facility with which members lent themselves to present their Petitions." And in the following year Mr. Robinson (afterwards Lord Goderich) said: "True it was, that offices under the Crown had numerically increased, as compared with former times; but, on the other hand, there had grown up a counteracting influence which opposed—and he hoped always would oppose—an insuperable barrier to undue influence in the Crown. Could any one deny the existence of that counteracting power which rendered comparatively inefficient in the country the influence, direct or indirect, of the Crown? When the extension of universal information throughout the country was considered, a degree of information which gave respectability to public opinion which it had never before possessed—an intelligence which no man half a century ago could have expected—was not the balance to Government interest apparent to every man? Were the acts of public men half a century ago scrutinised with the just severity applied to them at present? Could any individual in eminent station do a single act which was not canvassed by the public at large? And did not every public officer at present feel that he acted under a responsibility unknown to Ministers of former times?"[1]

The opinion of another future Prime Minister may also be quoted—that of Mr. Peel, expressed not in debate but in a letter to his friend Croker. "Do

[1] Hansard's *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. vi. (1822), p. 1089.

"you not think that the tone of England—of that great compound of folly, weakness, prejudice, wrong feeling, right feeling, obstinacy, and newspaper paragraphs, which is called public opinion—is more liberal, to use an odious but intelligible phrase, than the policy of the Government? Do not you think that there is a feeling becoming daily more general and more confirmed—that is, independent of taxation, or any immediate cause—in favour of some undefined change in the mode of governing the country? It seems to me a curious crisis, when public opinion never had such influence on public measures, and yet never was so dissatisfied with the share which it possessed. It is growing too large for the channels that it has been accustomed to run through. God knows! it is very difficult to widen them exactly in proportion to the size and force of the current which they have to convey, but the engineers that made them never dreamt of various streams that are now struggling for a vent."[1]

Among the causes which were contributing to make the public opinion of the Platform more powerful was the additional publicity given to its proceedings by its fellow-labourer in the struggles for liberty—the Press, also now rapidly growing in influence and power. Without a published report of the speeches delivered from the Platform, their effect was restricted to the very limited number of persons reached by the voice of the Speaker, and such reminiscences thereof as they could carry away to retail to their friends. But the wider circulation given to Platform speeches by the Press extended their effect to an immeasurable extent, in some cases carrying the voice of the Speaker to the uttermost parts of the country.

[1] Mr. Peel to Mr. Croker, 23d March 1820, *The Croker Papers*, vol. i. p. 170.

From Prentice's *History of Manchester*[1] we learn the beginning of the practice of publishing reports of meetings and speeches in an important part of the provincial Press : "To the occurrences of 1819," he says, "the people of Lancashire owe the system of giving regular and full reports in their local newspapers of all important public meetings and law proceedings. Previously, subjects of great consequence were dismissed in a single paragraph. A town's meeting in Manchester would be noticed much as follows: 'A large meeting was held in the Bull's Head on Thursday last, for the resolutions of which see advertisement in our front page.'" And he adds: "The agitation kept up by the radicals, and the wanton stretch of power exercised by the Manchester magistracy, had excited so much attention that the conductors of the London Press thought it worth their while to send able reporters to the scene of action." Thus the Press, with its growing power and widening circle of readers, was giving its help to the Platform, and the Platform profited to an incalculable extent both in notoriety and in influence.

Making every allowance for the great advances which the Platform had made, it must be acknowledged that, further than bringing an increased popular influence to bear on the House of Commons, the Platform had not yet secured any actual control over the Government, or wrung from it any decisively popular measures of reform. But the real point of interest at this precise stage of its history is not so much the actual power it had attained, as the forces at work in the country which were making it powerful—forces which not all the ingenuity of Cabinet Ministers or Crown lawyers could for any length of time restrain. The firm tenure of

[1] p. 179.

office by Lord Liverpool and the packed Parliament prevented any important constitutional questions being dealt with. Ministers had a sufficient majority in the House of Commons to reject every measure they disapproved, and to secure the passing of any measure they introduced, and the House of Lords was in complete accord with them. But below the line of actual power to insist on Parliament carrying reforms, such as the Platform now possesses, there was considerable room for progress, and it was towards making good its progress here, that the popular forces were at this time flowing. A free uncontrolled Platform, unrestrained as to liberty to meet, and liberty of speech, was the first essential for securing those reforms on which the hearts of the people were set—it would be the leverage by which those reforms would ultimately be secured.

Though the Platform was showing unmistakable evidence of progress, certain causes of weakness in its efficiency are plainly evident at this period. The principal one was its deficiency in one of the great sources of its later strength—namely, organisation.

As yet, there was no real organisation of the Platform. The law of 1799 against Corresponding Societies placed difficulties in the way, and except in 1780 a general organisation had not been attempted—indeed, for various reasons, was not possible. The meetings which had taken place in different localities in 1819 were the spontaneous natural outcome of the feelings in those localities. Here and there there were local committees which got up a meeting, but there was no general organisation, no directing head. Major Cartwright attempted a sort of organisation by means of local Hampden Clubs, but it was inoperative and not worthy the name of organisation. Sir Francis Burdett,

the respectable figure-head of the Radicals in Parliament, never aspired to give agitation a general organisation, nor did any other of the Radical members of Parliament. Peripatetic orators, such as Hunt, Harrison, and Cobbett, drifted only from place to place as they were asked to go to give *éclat* to the meetings; in no sense were they organisers; scarcely were they even a connecting link; nor among the prominent Platformers of the time does there appear to have been one capable of organising the people in a general movement, or of imposing certain definite lines of action in their agitation for reform.

Another cause of weakness which the Platform laboured under at this time, was the absence of those of the upper or better educated classes who were in favour of popular freedom. This had been long deplored. In 1812 an interesting article in the *Edinburgh Review* gave expression to this regret. The writer asked: "Whence arises the dislike of popular meetings, too prevalent not merely among the natural enemies of the people, but among many real friends to popular rights? Their apprehensions arise, we suspect, in a great degree, from fastidiousness of taste. They dislike the kind of oratory which is most absurdly believed to be necessary in popular meetings; and they are still more averse to the unworthy arts which men too often practice for the sake of popular favour. . . . As long as popular meetings are shunned by the more enlightened members of society, they must want much of the respectability and effect which they ought to have; and the fear of either failing to gratify and instruct such an audience, or of descending too low to gain this end, is apt to scare those whose patriotism would otherwise lead them thither, and whose talents might there be exerted to the lasting benefit of their country. . . .

"But we would ask, if the diffusion of knowledge—the constant habit of reading, and of reading on political subjects—the greater morality and decorum of modern manners—the peaceful demeanour of men who bear the part of citizens and not soldiers—if these circumstances are not well calculated to prepare an English public meeting for behaving with dignity, and for listening with satisfaction and intelligence to the discourses of well-informed and rational men, who may treat them, not as children, but as judges, and give them credit for preferring sense to nonsense? . . . Let us hope, then, that the fastidiousness we have been speaking of, will no longer prevent the most upright and enlightened men in the community from coming forward and performing a duty sacred and paramount to the people, and only from misconception disagreeable to themselves."[1]

Again, in 1819, the same *Review* returned to the subject: "We take the most alarming sign of the times to be the separation of the upper and middle classes of the community from the lower, which is now daily and visibly increasing."[2]

Lord Erskine also remarked on it. He said: "In the whole of the late proceedings and events, one of the most fatal things had been that the higher orders of the people separated themselves too much from the lower orders. . . . In my opinion the higher ranks do ill in thus seceding from the lower. If the latter have swerved from their duty, would it not be better for the former to rally them round the principles of the Constitution, and lead them back to their duty, than thus to make, as it were, a separate cause against them?"

It is evident too that there was a disposition on the

[1] *Edinburgh Review*, vol. xx. p. 418, "Rights of the People."

[2] *Ibid.* vol. xxxii. p. 294.

part of the lower classes to look for protection and guidance to some portion of the higher ranks of their fellow-subjects, and it is interesting finding this clearly expressed in a resolution at a public meeting.

At the meeting at Hunslet Moor, near Leeds, on the 19th July 1819, a resolution was passed: "That this meeting cannot but view with regret the apathy of our should-be leaders—that is, our men of property—in not supporting our mutual rights, etc. We therefore entreat them to stand forward, and espouse the constitutional rights of the people, by endeavouring to obtain a radical reform in the system of representation, which can alone save the trading and labouring classes from ruin."

There were signs that this neglect of the Platform by the men who ought to have been leading the people was not likely to be of much longer duration. It had dated from the French Revolution, but the action of the Government in connection with the Peterloo massacre had disgusted many leading men of Liberal opinions, and they were beginning to return to their natural position. The participation of Lord Fitzwilliam and other noblemen in the Yorkshire meeting was the first evidence of the change.

Reviewing then the forces which were thus in active operation at this period, all making for the free and uncontrolled use of the Platform, it is evident that the task which the Government had attempted of silencing the Platform was not likely to be successful. The forces at work to defeat the Government were too powerful, and were of such a character as precluded success in a campaign against them. The Government and the majority in Parliament wanted to perpetuate the existing exclusive system of government. That they were to govern, and that the people were automata to be

moved about just as they wished, was the cardinal article of their political creed. To their minds there was no other system either desirable or possible—only let that system go on—that was all they wanted. But it would not go on—at least not for much longer.

It was doomed—doomed by the growing numbers of the people, doomed by the increasing education and growing wealth of the people, doomed by the growth of ideas originating far back in the history of our country, but obtaining an immense impetus by the lessons of the sounder better part of the French revolutionary teaching, and by the instruction of some of the most enlightened minds at home. The system was too inequitable—too unfair, too narrow—to be much longer possible. Once the real power in the nation had shifted from inside Parliament to outside Parliament, no long time could elapse before that power would actually assert itself, and exact from Parliament what that Parliament was not prepared to give.

CHAPTER XIII

THE EMANCIPATION OF THE PLATFORM

PUBLIC meetings prohibited, except such as were convened and approved by the "powers that be," or held in a house or building; public speech free only to the extent that the most ignorant, bigotted, or intolerant Justice of the Peace might, in his graciousness, please to permit; the right of petition, which had been wrung from reluctant sovereigns, practically annihilated—such, under a Tory Ministry, and an unreformed Parliament, was the spectacle which England—the vaunted mother of liberty, the boasted home of freedom, of free speech, and of a free Press—presented to the world at the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century—little more than seventy years ago.

It is hard to realise that such should have been the state of things so short a time since—within the lifetime of many men now living—yet so it was, and it is the more remarkable when we consider the absence of justification for it. No justification was afforded by a breakdown or insufficiency of the ordinary law, or from any inability to put it in force. The law was in effective working order. If the meetings were illegal, as was so strenuously contended, the people attending them could have been prosecuted for attending illegal meetings. If

anything seditious was said at them from the Platform, the speaker could have been easily rendered amenable for seditious libel, or, following the precedent of Yorke's case, seditious conspiracy. There was no difficulty in framing an indictment that would bring an offender within the meshes of the law, and juries, as constituted then, were by no means too prone to acquit persons charged before them. Nor had Ministers any justification from the circumstances of the time. Their great exemplar—Pitt—whom they were so slavishly following, had at least some for his repressive legislation,—the panic begotten by the horrors of the French Revolution; the war with France, in which England's existence was at stake; the silly coquetting of certain Societies in England with foreign enemies; the wild excitement of the times; the novelty of large public meetings. Lords Liverpool, Sidmouth, and Castlereagh, almost a generation later, had not the shadow of an excuse for their policy. The horrors of the French Revolution had faded into the past; England, powerful and self-confident, was at peace with all the world; there was no intriguing with foreign foes; there were no Corresponding Societies or other organisation for agitation; large meetings of the people had become more or less familiar to the general public; and in no case had there been disturbance or disorder, or breach of the peace at any meetings, except where it had been provoked or actually caused by the authorities.

And now, there was a new King upon the throne—George IV.,—but only nominally a new King, for as Regent he had been virtually King for many years; and the people could derive little hope of a change of policy from the nominal change in the occupant of the throne, for it was his hand that had welded the final link in the

fetters that now bound them. Once a Liberal, and a boon companion of the "man of the people," he, like many others, had been frightened by the French Revolution from his Liberal leanings; gradually he had fallen in with Pitt's repressive legislation. From "The Two Acts" he had passed on to "The Four Acts," and, with accelerated strides, from "The Four Acts" to "The Six Acts"; and now he was actually King, and less likely than ever to side with the people against a Tory Ministry. And then, as if to confirm him and his Ministers in their policy, within less than a month of his accession to the throne, an event happened which appeared to afford justification for "The Six Acts." The Cato Street Conspiracy came to light. It was the work of Thistlewood—whose name has already been mentioned—and some confederates, and it was aimed at the lives of the Ministers, and the overthrow of the Government. Information of the plot having reached the Government, the conspirators were arrested, most of them forthwith in a loft in Cato Street, the remainder soon after. The plot was seized on by the King and King's Ministers as a defence of their policy. "The flagrant and sanguinary conspiracy which has lately been detected," said the King in his speech proroguing Parliament, "must vindicate to the whole world the justice and expediency of those measures to which you judged it necessary to resort in defence of the laws and Constitution of the kingdom."

There is not, however, any justification for condemning the Platform on account of this event, much less for silencing public discussion and preventing public meetings in the country. Thistlewood had taken some part in the first meeting at Spa Fields in 1817 and in the riot, and had been tried for the latter on the absurdly exagger-

ated charge of high treason, and been acquitted; but he was not a Platform orator or agitator, nor was he of the type to be contented with meetings and speeches. Indeed, as has already been shown, he was repudiated by the man most identified with the Platform at the time—Henry Hunt. There is, as a matter of fact, not one tittle of evidence to show that the Platform had incited him and his fellow conspirators to the action they contemplated, or that it had in any way encouraged them in their infamous designs; and even if it could have been distinctly proved that the Platform was directly responsible for this result, that would not have been a justification for depriving the whole population of Great Britain of the right of public meeting and free speech.

It must have seemed to Ministers an adverse fate which again necessitated a general election, with its attendant meetings and Platformings, just after they had exhausted their ingenuity in devising means for the prevention of meetings, and the suppression of free speech. But a new King having come to the throne, a new Parliament had to be elected, and the existing Parliament was dissolved on the 28th February 1820.

Of the general election little need be said. No special feature distinguished it from many that had gone before; no sensible change took place in the composition of parties in the House of Commons. The borough-mongers held the key of the Parliamentary position, Scotland, with but two exceptions, supporting them.

The election is, I think, mainly remarkable for a speech made by Canning, which must be regarded as a most important event in the history of the Platform, for it was an acknowledgment or an avowal by a Cabinet Minister[1] of his relation to his constituents

[1] He was President of the Board of Control.

—an acknowledgment of a relationship far closer than had ever been avowed before.[1] Speaking at a public dinner at Liverpool in March 1820, he said: "With respect to the transactions of the last short session of Parliament previous to the dissolution, I feel that it is my duty, as your representative, to render to you some account of the part which I took in that assembly to which you sent me—I feel it my duty also as a member of the Government by which those measures were advised. Upon occasions of such trying exigency as those which we have lately experienced, I hold it to be of the very essence of our free and popular Constitution, that an unreserved interchange of sentiment should take place between the representative and his constituents; and if it accidentally happens, that he who addresses you as your representative, stands also in the situation of a responsible adviser of the Crown, I recognise in that more rare occurrence a not less striking or less valuable peculiarity of that Constitution, under which we have the happiness to live, by which a Minister of the Crown is brought into contact with the great body of the community; and the service of the King is shown to be a part of the service of the people." It is the first avowal of a Minister as to the right of his constituents to hear him, and it set an example which other statesmen, coming after him, might find it to their advantage to follow.

The election over, it might be assumed that with the Seditious Meetings Act in force public meetings and speeches would have been over also, but no very great length of time elapsed after the general election before the Platform revived. And here a very notable difference must be pointed out between the result

[1] Therry's *Canning*, vol. vi. pp. 369, 370.

of the suppression of the Platform by Pitt in the end of the eighteenth century, and its suppression by Lord Liverpool's government at the end of the second decade of the nineteenth century, for it is a difference which very strongly marks the progress the Platform had made in the intervening period. On the former occasion the Platform was absolutely and completely suppressed, and for many years no attempt whatever was made to revive it. But in the latter case the revival of the Platform began almost immediately after its suppression. It is true that the revival was not the same in its character as the meetings which had been suppressed and prohibited, but the revival nevertheless showed that, in one form or another, the Platform had become an institution in the country which would be had recourse to, if not by one, then by some other section of the people who needed it to speak by.

But if the revival in 1820 differed in one respect from the revival in 1805, it most curiously resembled it in two others—first, that suppressed among the civic industrial population it was revived by the county freeholders and electors in the large cities; and next, that the primary cause of its revival was, once more, iniquity in high places.

The scandal which, after Pitt's suppression, awoke the Platform into life and action concerned the public life of no less a person than one of the principal Ministers of State; the scandal on the present occasion concerned the private life of even greater personages—the greatest in the land—the King and the Queen. Personal cases are often more hotly espoused by the general public than political principles, and this case was to afford an illustration of this circumstance.

Popular attention was quickly riveted on the quarrel, and every means was taken of showing the interest felt in it. Into the details of that unsavoury business it is unnecessary to enter. The King, whose moral character partook very much of the description applied by his father to the Wilkes' agitation, that of "outrageous licentiousness,"[1] had separated himself from his wife, and having reason to believe that her conduct since their separation, while she was travelling abroad, was not above reproach, he, regardless of his own notorious delinquencies, and scandalous immoralities, determined, if possible, to get a divorce from her. On his accession to the throne, his wife, now become Queen of England, returned home to claim her position as such. Under the circumstances of the case there could be little popular sympathy with the King. Sympathy, in fact, went the other way; and on the Queen's arrival at Dover, on the 5th June, she was received with great enthusiasm; her journey to London was a sort of triumphal progress, and vast crowds assembled in London to receive her. The public considered that she was being ill-treated and persecuted, and loudly expressed their feelings in her behalf. How great the interest was may be inferred from the leading article in *The Times* of 7th June, which began: "The Queen of England now so occupies all thoughts that it would be difficult to us, and offensive to the nation, to affect to speak on any other subject. The Queen of England is at present everything with everybody."

As usual now in times of popular movement, the Platform was enlisted to express the popular voice, nor were the provisions of the Seditious Meetings Prevention

[1] See *Correspondence between George III. and Lord North*—the King to North 16th April 1769.

Act sufficient to prevent its use. The Lord Mayor, Aldermen, and Livery of London lost no time in setting the example, and assembled in Common Hall, and adopted an Address to her of welcome and sympathy.[1]

On the 30th June a meeting was held of the inhabitants of the borough of Southwark, and an Address to the Queen was adopted. The proceedings at it showed how stringently the provisions of the Seditious Meetings Act were enforced. The High Bailiff convened the meeting; he was very strict in preventing speakers wandering from the exact subject which had been stated in the requisition for convening the meeting. He said, "He conceived that the requisition bound the meeting to the precise address, and that extraneous matter could not be introduced." He produced the Seditious Meetings Act, and observed that a clause in it "warranted him in stating what he had, and provided many severe restrictions against digressing from the particular subject of a requisition." This speech was received with "loud hissing."[2]

On the 4th July a numerous meeting of the inhabitants of Westminster was held, and an Address to the Queen adopted, and speeches were made by Sir F. Burdett and Mr. Hobhouse and Thelwall.[3]

On 17th July there was a meeting of the Court of Common Council, and Petitions to the House of Lords and House of Commons were adopted in favour of the Queen.[4]

A large meeting of the inhabitants of Middlesex was held. Resolutions of sympathy with the Queen were passed, and an Address adopted. Many speeches were made. The report of the proceedings occupied four and a half columns of *The Times*.[5]

[1] *The Times*, 7th June.
[2] *Ibid.*, 1st July 1820.
[3] *Ibid.*, 5th July.
[4] *Ibid.*, 18th July.
[5] *Ibid.*, 9th August.

On the 19th a county meeting for Norfolk was held at Norfolk, largely attended by many gentlemen of the first respectability. A Petition to the House of Commons was adopted against the Bill against the Queen.[1]

But it was not without opposition that meetings were held. Every difficulty was thrown in the way—Mayors, Magistrates, and High Sheriffs refusing to comply with the requisitions to convene meetings, no matter how respectably signed. At Rochester the Mayor refused to convene a meeting; in Suffolk the application to convene a county meeting was unsuccessful.

The people followed with the keenest interest the progress of the proceedings in Parliament against the Queen—the trial in the House of Lords—the Bill of degradation and divorce. The agitation was crowned with success so far that the Divorce Bill was abandoned by the Government, Lord Liverpool acknowledging that their action was partly due to the state of public feeling. This success did not check the tide of public sympathy with the Queen. Illuminations and rejoicings were held all over the country, and innumerable Addresses poured in on her, presented sometimes by deputations and large crowds.

In London three large "Ward" meetings were held to express sympathy with her; and the ladies of London, Westminster, and Southwark, held a large meeting at Freemason's Hall for the purpose of congratulating her upon the close of her prosecution. As the summer and autumn went on a large number of public meetings were held—held sometimes in spite of objecting High Sheriffs, being convened instead by the requisite number of magistrates.[2]

In Berkshire the Sheriff refused to convene a

[1] *The Times*, 21st August

[2] *Ibid.*, 27th September.

county meeting. It was forthwith called by eleven magistrates, with Lord Folkestone at their head.[1]

In Durham the same thing happened, and here Lord Grey and several other magistrates convened the meeting. It was held on the 13th December. "The crowds that attended this meeting were distinguished by rank, influence, and property in the county; by talent, acquirements, and respectability,"—a proof that the natural leaders of the people were returning to their allegiance to the public. An Address to the King was adopted, praying him to restore the Queen's name to the Liturgy, etc.; and Lord Grey made a long speech. He said, referring to the conduct of the assembly he was addressing, "Let all England follow the example they were setting. Let them approach the throne like men who 'know their rights, and knowing dare maintain,' against the threats of power and the blandishments of corruption, sober but enthusiastic, firm but prudent, moderate but resolute and fearless, and England may yet be saved."[2]

Even Edinburgh succeeded in holding a meeting, "agreeably to a public advertisement in the newspapers."[3] It was called in order to petition the Crown to dismiss his Ministers, and it was held in "the Pantheon,"—some 4000 persons being in it. Lord Cockburn, in giving an account of it, says: "This meeting was distinguished from the one in 1814 on the Slave Trade, the one in 1816 on the Property Tax, and the one in 1817 on the North Bridge Buildings, by its being purely political, and in direct and avowed opposition to the hereditary Toryism of Government. It was

[1] *The Times*, 19th December.

[2] *The Times*, 18th December 1820, wrote: "We most cordially join with this prayer."

[3] See *The Times*, 22d December 1820.

the first modern occasion on which a great body of respectable persons had met, publicly and peaceably, in Edinburgh, to assail this fortress."[1]

Jeffrey spoke, "and sealed the character of the meeting by an admirable address," and the proposed Petition was adopted.

On 30th December (1820) a county meeting of Gloucester was held for the purpose of petitioning the King to dismiss from his councils his present unworthy Ministers, and a vote of censure was passed on the Sheriff for refusing to convene the meeting.[2]

At a meeting which was held at Derby[3]—"the most numerous ever known"—for the purpose of adopting an Address to the King, the Duke of Devonshire attended, and proposed a rival Address, which was carried, praying the King to dismiss his Ministers. This lead given, other meetings quickly followed suit, and at several county meetings a totally different Address was adopted than that which the meetings had been convened to adopt. Here was another contingency not foreseen by Ministers in their Seditious Meetings Prevention Act; and it is clear from these proceedings that even those who attended county meetings were not disposed to submit to the restraints imposed on their rights by the Government.

It was a great revival of the Platform, in spite of "The Six Acts"; and it was only possible from the fact that many of the principal Whigs of the country,—men of position and property, who had shrunk from the popular cause in affright at the horrors of the French Revolution, and deserted Liberalism—had now become disgusted with the policy of the Government and the treat-

[1] Cockburn's *Memorials*, p. 376. See also his *Life of Lord Jeffrey*, p. 261.

[2] See *The Examiner*, 1821, p. 14.

[3] *Ibid.* p. 29.

ment of the Queen, and were beginning to return to the Liberal principles which they had for a time abandoned.

There was, however, a deeper influence created in the public mind by this discreditable business.

Place has thus described it:[1] "The absurd, and cruel, because absurd, persecution of his wife, and the excitation it caused all over the island, made the middle and working classes of the people much more familiar with royalty and the privileged aristocracy than they had ever before been. They were made to understand, and persuaded to believe, that they understood these matters much better than they had previously done, and this, in their own opinion, raised them nearer to a level with the privileged classes, and brought these classes down to a level nearer to their own. It was a step towards democracy which can never be retraced. . . .

"The persecution of the Queen induced her to throw herself upon the people; . . . and they made such demonstration in her behalf as neither she, nor they themselves, nor indeed any one anticipated, or at all supposed would be made. Multitudes of all ranks below the peerage, even to the bare-legged sailors along-shore below London Bridge, costermonger's, and common porters, went in processions to Brandenburgh House, saw the Queen, and heard her converse. She was the very woman herself, beyond all other women, to satisfy the inquisitive people that the distinction claimed by high rank was merely fictitious. She was vulgarly familiar and commonplace in her language and deportment, much less genteel in all respects than many of the well-dressed women who went to her in the processions. . . . Those of the aristocracy who attended the Queen had little either in their

[1] Place, MSS., 27,789, p. 123.

manners or appearance to produce any favourable impression on the multitudes whom day after day they had to introduce to the presence of the Queen. Royalty was judged of by the Queen, and aristocracy by the noblemen and ladies in her suite, and both fell amazingly in the estimation of the people.

"The conduct of the King, and of the aristocracy who took part with him, or refrained from taking part with the Queen, was considered as extremely depraved; and as nearly all the aristocracy were included in this definition, so all were reprobated and condemned, and the impression thus made to their disadvantage has been ever since increasing."

It is unnecessary to pursue this topic further. The miserable strife ended with the death of the Queen in August 1821, leaving among numerous indirect results this most important one, that it brought the Platform to life and vigour just after the almost fatal wound received from the hands of the Government by "the Six Acts."

Another influence which helped—though in a far milder degree—towards the revival of the Platform at this time must also be mentioned. This was the condition of the agricultural population, then miserable in the extreme. Numerous meetings were held in different parts of England during the winter of 1820-21, and resolutions passed and Petitions adopted setting forth the difficulties and distresses of the agriculturists. The House of Commons, sympathetic always with anything affecting the value of land, on the presentation of the Petitions from these meetings, at once appointed a Committee of Inquiry on the subject, and for a time the Platform here was lulled to rest.[1]

[1] See *Edinburgh Review*, vol. xxxvi. p. 452, February 1822; and Report from Committee of House of Commons on depressed State of Agriculture in 1821, *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. v. 1821.

It is a fact very clearly showing itself in the history of the Platform, that just as Parliament was often encouraged and stimulated by the Platform, so did the Platform often derive stimulus and encouragement from proceedings in Parliament. The proceedings in Parliament during the session of 1821 were admirably calculated to inspirit the Platform—the subject of Parliamentary reform being kept well before Parliament. On the 17th April a great number of Petitions in favour of it were presented, and Mr. Lambton moved "That the House do resolve itself into a Committee of the whole House to consider the state of the representation of the people in Parliament,"[1] unavailingly, of course, but still usefully.

On the 8th May 1821 Mr. Lennard moved the repeal of two of the Six Acts,—the Seditious Meetings Act, and the punishment of Libels Act,[2]—and some good points were made in the debate.

"It was the energy, the boldness of a man's mind which, prompting him to speak, not in private, but in large and popular assemblies, that constituted the principle of freedom.

"It was that principle which gave life to liberty, and without it the human character was a stranger to freedom. Would silence ensure security? Did they suppose that they made men forget their grievances when they made them silent? No; if a man who feels himself aggrieved is prevented from declaring his sentiments in a constitutional way, he is forced to other expedients for redress."

Mr. Abercromby drew attention to the fact that "meetings like those which had taken place at Manchester, Birmingham, and Sheffield, had been declared

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. v. p. 360, 1821. [2] *Ibid.* p. 554.

illegal by the Courts of Justice, and therefore there was no pretence for continuing these laws.

But no arguments or considerations could induce the Government to repeal these Acts; and then, on the 9th of May,[1] Lord J. Russell brought forward the subject of Parliamentary reform, describing the existing corruption in Parliament and at Parliamentary elections; and referring to the disturbances in certain of the large towns he attributed them to the fact of those towns having no representatives in Parliament.

In the same month[2] Mr. Bennett moved to bring in a Bill for the better securing the independence of Parliament, thus bringing into notice again the nomination of the placemen who fought the ministerial battles; and, before the session was ended, Mr. Hume brought forward the ever-interesting subject of economy and retrenchment, his object being to enforce them in every department of the public expenditure—a subject becoming of ever deeper consequence, the expenditure of the country having risen from £16,000,000 in 1792 to £70,000,000 in 1821.[3]

Thus, one way or another, the subjects most engaging the more advanced and intelligent public opinion of the time were kept before the public, and the Platform was given fresh material for agitation.

The agricultural distress continued severe, and early in January (1822) county meetings were held in Monmouthshire and in Norfolk. As this form of distress affected the landowners more than any other, a large number of them took a prominent and active part in the meetings, and avowed themselves advocates of retrenchment, which was strongly insisted on, Hume's

[1] Hansard, vol. v. p. 604, 9th May.
[2] *Ibid.* p. 1054.
[3] *Ibid.* p. 1345, 27th June.

speeches even being referred to with approbation. At the Suffolk meeting on 29th January 1822 two dukes (Grafton and Norfolk), four lords, and three baronets all spoke.

The agricultural distress and financial pressure which was thus occupying the Platform led naturally to the consideration of remedies, and so by degrees the desirability of Parliamentary reform came to be mooted. At the Suffolk meeting a Mr. Merest said: "The lavish expenditure of Government had caused all the mischief; *that* had been sanctioned by the House of Commons, and without a reform, therefore, no cure would ensue. The only efficient remedy was to make the House of Commons what it ought to be—the representative of the people, and a check upon Government, instead of being what it now is—the representative of Government and a check on the people." Meetings followed in Devon, Surrey, Worcestershire, Westminster, Middlesex, Cornwall, Cambridge, and Bedford, and speech after speech at them dwelt on the necessity of reduction of taxation, and declared that the only remedy was Parliamentary reform.

The stream of public opinion and the activity of the Platform is well described in a letter from Croker to Peel, dated 1st February 1822, which is also noteworthy as testifying to the status of the Platform: "The cause of reform, it cannot be doubted, has made great progress; public opinion is created by the Press or by public meetings, and by the numbers and weight of the advocates of a cause. Now, almost the whole Press and all public meetings are loud for reform, and I believe I may say with truth that such is the apathy, or the timidity, on our side of the question

that, except an annual speech of Mr. Canning at a Liverpool dinner, and the occasional article of some obscure man of letters in the *Quarterly Review*, nothing is spoken or written to oppose the torrent of the reformers. To this must be added the accession of names which the reformers have acquired in some of the great Whig lords. Lord Fitzwilliam and Lord Darlington, two of the largest borough owners in England, have joined them."[1] And he adds further on: "In the humbler circle in which I move, at tables, where ten years ago you would have no more heard reform advocated than treason, you will now find half the company reformers—moderate reformers, indeed, individually, but radical in the lump."

Encouraged by the number of Petitions presented to Parliament, Lord J. Russell, on the 25th April 1822, moved "That the present state of the representation of the people in Parliament requires the most serious consideration of this House.

"The question has been so often met and turned aside by fears of Jacobinism in foreign nations, or of tumults at home, that I feel it a great advantage to be able to say that our present state of external peace and internal tranquillity affords opportunity for ample and undisturbed discussion.

"There is another circumstance which ought to weigh in favour of the motion I make—the number of Petitions for reform of Parliament which have been pouring into this House since the beginning of the session. Petitions have this year been presented from the counties of Middlesex, Devon, Norfolk, Suffolk, Bedford, Cambridge, Surrey, Cornwall, and Huntingdon; also in great numbers from separate towns; and

[1] *The Croker Papers*, vol. ii. p. 52.

"the Petitions which have been presented for the release of Mr. Hunt nearly all contain a petition for reform."[1]

He drew attention to the fact that the petitioners did not ask for any one plan of reformation. "A few years ago all the Petitions prayed for universal suffrage, but at a meeting, in the present year, of the county of Middlesex—a meeting which might be supposed to bring together all classes of reformers—when a venerable advocate of the cause of reform proposed a petition for universal suffrage, he could find no one to second him. That single circumstance shows the disposition of the people to ask for reform as a cure for abuses existing, and not as a fanciful, untried measure, of which, in their own minds, they have some vague conception." But Parliament by 269 votes to 164 declined to accept Lord J. Russell's motion.

But if the Platform was thriving to a certain extent, despite the attempt of the Government to destroy it, other forces were making against it. Jeffrey, in a letter dated 27th January 1822, sums up the position in these words:[2] "The King has a rooted horror at all liberal opinions. . . . The body of the people are so poor, and their prospects so dismal, that it is quite easy to stir them up to any insane project of reform; and the dread of this makes timid people rally round those who are for keeping order by force, and neutralises the sober influence of the Whigs.

"Our only chance is in the extremity of our financial embarrassments, which will force such retrenchments on the Ministry as at once to weaken their powers of corrup-

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. vii. p. 52.

[2] See *Life of Jeffrey*, by Lord Cockburn, vol. ii. p. 197.

tion, and to lend credit to those whose lessons they have so long contemned, and must now stoop to follow."

The Platform cry for retrenchment resulted early in March in the curtailment of the salary of one Lord of the Admiralty, and in May, in an address to the Crown for the discontinuance of one of the Postmaster-Generals —but then a Government pull came. Lord Eldon thus describes it in a letter to Lady Bankes (16th May 1822): "To check the efforts making to pull down all the establishments of the Crown, Ministers declared in the House of Commons last night, in a debate upon the Civil List, their intention to resign if those efforts should succeed again. This seems to have brought the country gentlemen to their senses, and the Government succeeded by a majority of 127." [1]

In the next month Brougham raised a debate on the growth of the influence of the Crown. He described the increased patronage which the Crown now had, owing to the increased number of military and naval officers, and 800 colonial appointments; the increased revenue staff at home, the enormous increase of the amount of taxation; and he maintained that the influence of the Crown had increased by its being better arrayed and organised than it was; but his motion was set aside by 216 votes to 101, or a majority of 115.[2]

A really graphic description of one county meeting will convey so much more realisable an idea of what county meetings at this period really were that I give the following account of one of them from the pen of Baron A. de Staël Holstein who visited England at this time. He prefaced it with some comments on county meetings generally.[3]

[1] *Life of Lord Eldon*, vol. ii. p. 451.

[2] Hansard, vol. vii. p. 1265.

[3] See his *Letters on England* (published 1825)—Letter XI.

"Of all the public assemblages of persons in England, perhaps none are so striking to a stranger as county meetings. These are usually held in the open air, in a marketplace, a court before a town hall, or some frequented public walk, for the number of persons collected by interest or curiosity is too great for any public room to contain them. And, in fact, though the freeholders of the county are the only persons who have a right to vote at them, almost any one that chooses to be present is admitted without distinction. The business is not to decide as legislators or judges on positive rights or interests, but to consult or to guide the opinions of the many."

He then gave a description of the meeting for the county Kent, which was held on the 11th June 1822 in the Town Hall of Maidstone: "I set off in the morning with some great landholders of the county—Whigs. . . .

"We alighted at an inn, where we found some of the persons of greatest consequence in the vicinity already met in committee. A draft of a Petition had been prepared the day before, in which the grievances of the agricultural class were enumerated; next a reduction of taxes was called for, as well as measures to raise the price of corn; and lastly, a reform of Parliament was demanded as the only remedy of all the evils of the State. This project seemed calculated to satisfy the wishes of the most democratic. It was then discussed, slight amendments made in it, and preparations to submit it to the general meeting—everything inducing a presumption that it would be adopted there without opposition.

"The hour of meeting arrived, and we went down to the marketplace. It was market day. Some thousands

of people were already assembled; all the windows of the adjacent houses were filled with spectators; with the noise of the crowd were mingled the lowing of oxen and the bleating of sheep, and all the confused bustle of buying and selling. The impatient multitude thronged round some carts placed for the convenience of speakers, and across one of which were the two deal boards, serving as the chair and desk of the Sheriff who presided at the meeting. Some got up on the wheels, others mounted on ladders, that they might be certain of not losing a word of what was said, so extremely sensible are the lower classes of the people in England of the pleasures of political eloquence. . . . After the Sheriff had announced the purpose of the meeting, a member of Parliament, the representative of the Whigs of the county, made a speech, in which he explained the motives of the intended petition. The conduct of the Ministry, and the increase of the taxes, owing to ruinous and impolitic wars, were naturally the subjects of his discourse, more than once interrupted by the thunder of applause from 10,000 auditors.

"The assembly appeared to be unanimous; however, Sir E. Knatchbull, the ministerial member, though almost alone, thought it incumbent on him not to let the speech of his colleague pass unanswered, and boldly undertook to defend the opinions of the Ministry, who were there at least in a great minority. His speech was listened to without favour, but with impartiality. . . .

"The Petition experienced no opposition, and the Sheriff was about to put it to the vote, when a voice was heard from the midst of the cart most thronged by the mob, claiming the right of moving an amendment. Every eye was directed to that quarter, where a man, with gray hairs, but stout made, and with a bold

"countenance, made way through his friends, and advanced to speak. This was the famous Cobbett; he was received with a general murmur of disapprobation. 'No Cobbett, no Jacobins!' exclaimed more than one voice. However, a nobleman in opposition claimed leave for him to speak. 'Is he a freeholder of the county?' was asked on all sides. 'Yes, I am,' answered Cobbett. 'Then you have a right to be heard,' said the Sheriff; 'and it is my duty to support you in it.' . . . He spoke, moving an amendment in favour of a reduction of the national debt; threatening Whigs — the great lords of the county — for retaining their rotten boroughs, and saying, 'The time has come to speak to you in harsher language, and you shall hear it from my mouth. Submit without longer delay to the sacrifice of your boroughs, or prepare yourselves for the sacrifice of your mansions and your fortunes.' . . . He was succeeded by another orator, who entered more at large into the amendment, and completed the conquest of the meeting. The efforts of the Whigs to reject it were without avail, and it was carried by a great majority.

"Here, then, we have a victory gained by the leader of the Jacobin party, not over a few obscure ministerialists, but over the Whigs—over the most considerable and most justly respected landholders of the county. . . . Would you not suppose the country to be on the verge of a revolution? . . . Not so, however. After a momentary agitation order is restored, and the people, satisfied with having enjoyed their rights, retire more attached than ever to the institutions by which these rights are secured. . . . I returned to London with the same persons whom I accompanied in the morning. They did not experience fewer testimonies of respect than before; nothing was changed; there was

not the least apprehension of the stability of rank or property; and 10,000 men voting a national bankruptcy 30 miles from the capital did not even occasion the slightest variation in the price of stocks."

He sums up his views on county meetings thus: "It would be wrong to conclude from this that county meetings are empty ceremonies—a sort of saturnalia for the day without any influence on the morrow. These meetings have a real influence on the opinions of the many; they enlighten and confirm them; they keep up, among the people of England, a sense of their rights and of their strength, without which all written securities are vain; and a statesman must be destitute of judgment and foresight who does not lend an attentive ear to the wishes expressed in meetings of this kind."

The description enables us to realise very vividly the nature, character, and import of county meetings at this time. Gradually, as we have seen, these meetings, convened mainly on the subject of agricultural distress, drifted ever more and more toward Parliamentary reform —gradually too, during these years, the different sections of the popular party subordinated their differences and began to form a more homogeneous party.

The beginning of 1823 saw the Platform vigorously at work. So early as the 3d of January a meeting of the county Norfolk was held, some 5000 to 6000 persons being at it—"a most numerous and respectable assemblage,"—and the High Sheriff in the chair. A Mr. Thurtell moved a series of resolutions, in which the excessive distress of the agriculturists was enlarged upon. Taxation was declared to be its chief cause—an abolition of all needless places, pensions, and sinecures, a partial reduction of the national debt, and the repeal of certain taxes were called for as remedies. The subject

of Parliamentary reform, however, was not mentioned—designedly, it may be presumed. The proposal was made to embody the purport of the resolutions in a Petition to Parliament, when suddenly and unexpectedly Cobbett appeared on the scene, just as he had done at Maidstone, and proposed a rival Petition. It was rather a startling document. The House was to be besought to pass an Act for causing an efficient reform in the House of Commons in order that such Parliament might adopt measures to effect the following purposes:[1]—An appropriation of a part of the public property, commonly called church property, and also the sale of Crown lands to the liquidation of the debt. A reduction of the standing army—a total abolition of all sinecures, pensions, grants, and emoluments, not merited by public services. An equitable adjustment with regard to the public debt, and also with regard to all debts and contracts between man and man. The Petition also asked that the House would be pleased to suspend by law, for one year, all distraints for rent, all process for tithes, and all processes arising out of mortgage, bond, annuity, or other contract affecting house or land, to repeal the whole tax on malt, hops, leather, soap, and candles. In conclusion, the Petition assured the House that the petitioners "venerate the Constitution of their fathers; that they sought for no change in the form of the Government; that they fervently hoped this Constitution might descend to their children; but that they were fully convinced that unless the present evils were speedily arrested and effectually cured, a convulsion must come, in which the whole of this ancient and venerable fabric will be crumbled into dust."

The unexpected intrusion of Cobbett led to a great

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, 1823, vol. viii. p. 1254.

clamour. An eye-witness has described the scene. He said that when he entered the hall, "Mr. Cobbett appeared to be speaking with the most violent gesticulations from one end of the hustings; a reverend gentleman was speaking apparently with equal energy from the other; and the under-sheriff was reading from a large paper in the middle; whilst, from the unintermitted clamour of the circle that surrounded them, it appeared to him that not one of them knew that the others were also holding forth."[1]

Another eye-witness described the confusion of the meeting, and stated that though he stood within two yards of Mr. Cobbett, he could scarcely collect a word that he uttered, for as soon as he came forward, great uproar and tumult ensued. To obtain attention Cobbett cried out, "Here's immediate relief for you—this will fill your bellies—this will prevent your beds from being taken from under you." The eye-witness adds, "It was, however, a very good-humoured meeting; everybody was laughing."

"The most numerous and respectable assemblage" preferred the Petition proposed by Cobbett to the more moderate one proposed by Mr. Thurtell, and it was adopted, and in due time was presented to and received by the House, much to the indignation of many people,—Mr. M. A. Taylor among the number,—who, though he declared himself to be a reformer, said the Petition was "a mockery and farce, containing a mass of absurdities, a tissue of false statements, and a farrago of inconclusive reasoning. It went to a direct revolution in Church and State."

Several counter-petitions reprobating the Petition were got up by the party which was defeated at the

[1] *Parliamentary Debates*, vol. viii. p. 1257.

meeting, and were presented to the House at the same time as it was.

Meetings such as these present a very interesting phase of Platform activity. They did not, however, all eventuate in the same manner.

On the 17th January a meeting was held in the Town Hall of Hereford, about 5000 persons being present. The Lord Lieutenant of the county presided, and he was accompanied by the leading gentry of the county, and the hall was thronged with the gentry and farmers of the county.

Cobbett here again proposed a Petition, but he was outvoted, and his Petition was rejected. That, however, which was proposed by a Mr. Charlton, and adopted, contained a sweeping condemnation of the Government, and asked for several financial reforms, some of an extreme character.

And then a county meeting was held in Somerset, Hunt, now released from prison, being at it, "ready," he said, "notwithstanding his imprisonment, to speak his mind again. He would endeavour to do it like a gentleman, but still he would speak out plainly." This meeting is interesting for one circumstance which occurred at it. Hunt urged the meeting not to wait for another county meeting, but to petition for reform *now*.[1] The High Sheriff, who was chairman, interfered, and declared "Once for all that he would not entertain any Petition in which reform was called for, because that topic had nothing to do with the present meeting"; and he further declared that the law allowed him to decide.

A county meeting took place in Yorkshire, expressly in reference to Parliamentary reform, at which the Hig-

[1] *The Examiner*, p. 67, 1823.

Sheriff was chairman, and at which Lord Milton, M.P., avowed his conversion to reform.[1] During the months of February and March 1823 numerous other county meetings were held. Hunt and Cobbett spoke at many of them. At many of the meetings at this period speeches in direct opposition to the object of the meeting were allowed by the meeting, and quietly listened to; in fact, a greater degree of toleration towards hostile speeches and opinions appears to have prevailed then than there does now, and there was more discussion at meetings than at present prevails.

That the revival of the Platform on this occasion was greater than on previous occasions is shown by the fact that it was no longer confined to England. Scotland, so long dead and inert, began to show signs of moving.

"It was thought," writes Lord Cockburn, "that the time had now arrived when a decided move might be made for a reform of our Parliamentary representation." . . .

"On the 8th March 1823 the Pantheon was filled. Mr. Craig, a merchant, presided, and a Petition was adopted. In the course of a few days about 7000 subscribed to it."[2]

Petitions for reform received, however, scant consideration from Parliament. In February Lord John Russell's modest request for a plain arithmetical statement of the number of voters who returned members for the several cities and boroughs and the right of voting was refused. The Government resisted the motion which was negatived by 128 to 90. In April he moved "That the present state of the representation requires the most serious consideration of this House;" but the House did not seem to think so by 280 votes to

[1] *The Examiner*, p. 71, 1823. [2] Cockburn's *Memorials*, pp. 403, 404.

169.[1] And in June Lord A. Hamilton brought forward his motion relative to the state of the Scotch county representation, where reform was badly required, as "in no county in Scotland did the number of voters exceed 240, and in one it was as low as 9." But the House declared by 152 votes against 117 that they would not reform this either.

The *Annual Register* of 1823, commenting on the meetings held during the year, said: "The language held at most of these meetings was violent in the extreme; but it was regarded by sober-minded men as the effusion of party spirit, and as being neither in unison with the sentiments nor suitable to the actual circumstances of the nation. The people saw and felt that many classes in the community were in a thriving state, and that the embarrassments even of the agriculturists were becoming every day less. A general opinion prevailed that, on subjects of internal legislation, the Ministry had shown more just and more enlarged views than their opponents."[2]

But what was in reality helping to quiet the country was the fact that the Government was showing a tendency to fall in to some extent with the Liberal opinions of the time. Their foreign policy met with general approval, and certain changes took place in some important offices which "were calculated to strengthen the Ministry in the public opinion," and were especially acceptable to the commercial part of the community.

The Government, moreover, had this in their favour, that the condition of the people generally was improving. "The country, in the beginning and throughout the whole of the year, exhibited the most unequivocal marks of a steady and progressive prosperity."[3]

[1] Hansard, vol. viii. p. 1260.
[2] *Annual Register*, p. 3, 1823.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 1.

During the autumn Canning once more showed his appreciation of the utility of the Platform and his love for it. He was visiting some of the commercial and manufacturing districts. In October he was in Devonshire, and at Plymouth he was presented with the freedom of the city.[1] In reply he delivered a speech which, in many ways, was remarkable, but which was most of all so in being absolutely the first instance of the public declaration by a Minister of State of the foreign policy of the country by other means than a speech in Parliament, or the still more orthodox and diplomatic practice of an official despatch. The speech was a striking testimony to the value which had been come to be set on the Platform by the greatest statesman of his time. Having returned his thanks for the honour which had been done him, he said: "The end which I confess I have always had in view, and which appears to me the legitimate object of pursuit to a British statesman, I can describe in one word. . . . In the conduct of political affairs, the grand object of my contemplation is the interest of England. Not, gentlemen, that the interest of England is an interest which stands isolated and alone. The situation which she holds forbids an exclusive selfishness; her prosperity must contribute to the prosperity of other nations; and her stability to the safety of the world. But intimately connected as we are with the system of Europe, it does not follow that we are therefore called upon to mix ourselves on every occasion with a restless and meddling activity in the concerns of the nations which surround us. It is upon a just balance of conflicting duties, and of rival but sometimes incompatible advantages, that a Government must judge when to put forth

[1] See *The Times*, 3d November 1823.

its strength, and when to husband it for occasions yet to come.

"Our ultimate object must be the peace of the world. That object may sometimes be best attained by prompt exertions—sometimes by abstinence from the interposition in contests which we cannot prevent. It is upon these principles that it did not appear to the Government of this country to be necessary that Great Britain should mingle in the recent contest between France and Spain.

"But while we thus control even our feelings by our duty, let it not be said that we cultivate peace either because we fear, or because we are unprepared for war. . . . The resources created by peace are means of war. In cherishing those resources, we but accumulate those means. Our present repose is no more a proof of inability to act than the state of inertness and inactivity in which I have seen those mighty masses that float in the waters above your town, is a proof they are devoid of strength, and incapable of being fitted for action.

"You well know how soon one of those stupendous masses, now reposing on their shadows in perfect stillness—how soon, upon any call of patriotism, or of necessity, it would assume the likeness of an animated thing, instinct with life and motion—how soon it would ruffle, as it were, its swelling plumage—how quickly it would put forth all its beauty and its bravery, collect its scattered elements of strength, and awaken its dormant thunder.

"Such as is one of those magnificent machines when springing from inaction into a display of its might—such is England herself, while apparently passive and motionless she silently concentrates the power to be put forth on an adequate occasion. But God forbid that

that occasion should arise! After a war sustained for nearly a quarter of a century—sometimes single-handed, and with all Europe arranged at times against her or at her side—England needs a period of tranquillity, and may enjoy it without fear of misconstruction. Long may we be enabled to improve the blessings of our present situation, to cultivate the arts of peace, to give to commerce, now reviving, greater extension, and new spheres of employment, and to confirm the prosperity now generally diffused throughout this island."

The year 1824 appears to have been still quieter so far as the action of the Platform was concerned; indeed, the particular phase of the Platform which appears to have been most in vogue at this time was a new one—that of political banquets—a useful form of public meeting and public speaking which the Seditious Meetings Prevention Act of 1819 had not thought of providing against—indeed, could scarcely have provided against. Thus, in 1823, a public dinner was given to that veteran Liberal—Lord Fitzwilliam; and the Whig Club of Cheshire had their annual dinner; and at Glasgow a dinner was given to Brougham and Denman, and there was a lot of useful speechifying. Even Ministers were sucked into the vortex, as Canning and Huskisson dined with the Sheriffs in London, and made speeches of some political import and consequence.

Any excuse almost served for a political banquet, and every banquet was made the occasion for inspiriting political speeches, which were duly reported in the newspapers, and afforded proof that extra-Parliamentary utterances might be quite as interesting as anything said in Parliament.

Scotland followed English example in this respect, and from 1821 onwards a series of these entertainments

took place in Scotland. "They were," writes Lord Cockburn,[1] "by far the most effective of all the public movements in Scotland on the popular side at that time. . . . They gathered together the aristocracy in station and in character of the Scotch Whig party; but derived still greater weight from the open accession of citizens, who for many years had been taught to shrink from political interference on this side, as hurtful to their business."

Otherwise, there is little to chronicle about the Platform: the country had sunk into temporary quiescence.

It was in this state of quiescence that the Seditious Meetings Prevention Act expired. The inference might possibly be drawn from this fact that the policy of the Government in suppressing the Platform was sealed with the proof of success. But so far from the Government having triumphed, the reverse was the truth; the real triumph rested with the Platform. The Government had silenced the Platform because they denied the right of the people to meet when they liked, where they liked, and if they liked. The Government repudiated the doctrine that any person had the right to call a meeting, or that people had the right to attend a meeting at a distance from their own homes. The Government instituted a censorship over the Platform by insisting that nothing should be said from it which did not meet with the approval of a magistrate. The Government objected to what a contemporary writer[2] called "The modern method of calling together large deliberative crowds, as a sort of *outer* Parliaments, having no other object than publicly to take into consideration affairs of State, and to record the result of

[1] *Life of Lord Jeffrey*, by Lord Cockburn, vol. i. p. 267.

[2] *Quarterly Review*, vol. xxii. p. 535, March 1820.

their deliberation in propositions or resolutions, addressed to none of the constituted authorities, but published purely as authorised expressions of popular opinion."

But as the Government legislation was only temporary, its expiration formally established and sanctioned, once and for ever, each and every one of these particular claims as recognised rights and principles. They had existed in a more or less uncertain shadowy way before; the legislation against them practically defined them, and gave each a separate importance; the expiration of that legislation left them as clear, no-longer-contested rights. Henceforth, any person, no matter how humble his position, could summon or convene as many meetings as he liked, provided, of course, they were not for an illegal purpose—the only check being the natural discouragement of nobody coming to them, and certain expenses connected with summoning them. Henceforth, any person could, without liability to punishment, attend any legal meeting he chose, whether it was at his own door or at the extreme end of the country. Henceforth, people could meet in any numbers they liked, provided their meeting did not excite alarm among his Majesty's subjects. Henceforth, any number of meetings might be held on the same day. And last, but most important of all, henceforth, any one could say what he liked at any meeting without liability to interruption by a magistrate, subject only to the restraint imposed by the risk of incurring a prosecution for libel, sedition, or certain other offences, if his language was so extreme as to bring him within the scope of the laws against those offences.

And here, too, it must be remarked that the increasing use of the Platform had imperceptibly secured for it

a greater latitude of expression—a greater scope of criticism—greater freedom of discussion. The narrow limitations on freedom of speech, which, in its earlier days, the Government and the judicial bench had sought to impose on it, had gradually been broken down; its progress in this respect was contemporaneous with the growing liberty of the Press, and gradually the fact was driving itself home into the minds of the authorities that *bonâ fide*, non-malicious criticism of public personages, institutions, and measures, must be submitted to. And so, when the severe restrictions on public meeting and public speaking came to an end with the expiration of the Seditious Meetings Prevention Act in 1825, the Platform was in a stronger position than ever it had been before. In fact, when once that Act—the principal of that celebrated code, "The Six Acts"—expired, the legal position of the Platform was clearly established and made good; the great, the long-contested struggle for free meeting and free speech was over; and victory rested with the people.

Thenceforward, for weal or woe, the Platform was to be free to continue its work, subject only to certain limited restrictions imposed on it by the ordinary law; thenceforward this tremendous engine of popular power was to be vested in the hands of the people, therewith—under Providence—to shape their own destinies, and the destinies of their country through future time.

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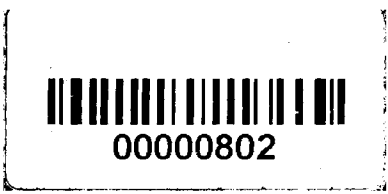

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